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Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	01/11 WHO: half Europe infected 6-8 weeks
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/11/world/omicron-covid-testing-vaccines#as-covid-sweeps-europe-the-who-warns-of-a-closing-window-to-act-now
GIST	More than half of people in Europe could be infected with the coronavirus in the next six to eight weeks, the World Health Organization warned on Tuesday, amid “a new west-to-east tidal wave sweeping across the region.”

“The region saw over seven million cases of Covid-19 in the first week of 2022, more than doubling over a two-week period,” Hans Kluge, the agency’s regional director for Europe, said at a news conference.

In a remarkable demonstration of how fast the virus is spreading, he said that 26 countries in the European region were reporting that more than 1 percent of their populations were catching the virus every week.

Although the W.H.O. has cautioned for months that booster shots could worsen vaccine equity around the world, Dr. Kluge said that they would play an essential role in protecting the most vulnerable people from severe disease and should also be used to protect health workers and other essential employees, including teachers.

He said that a wave of infection spreading from west to east was starting to hit nations with lower vaccination rates in the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

Despite the widespread level of infection, Dr. Kluge said that coronavirus vaccines remained remarkably effective at preventing severe illness and death. He cited data from Denmark showing that the number of unvaccinated people who needed hospital care in the latest wave was sixfold higher than among vaccinated people.

“For countries not yet hit with the omicron surge, there is a closing window to act now and plan for contingencies,” he said.

One of the central struggles of governments across Europe has been trying to keep schools open, and Dr. Kluge described those efforts as essential.

“Schools should be the last places to close and the first to reopen,” he said.

“The numbers of infected people are going to be so high in many places that schools in many countries are going to be unable to keep all classes open” because of illness and staff shortages, he added.

An example of that pressure could be seen this week in France, where 10,452 classes were canceled on Monday, according to the French government. Prime Minister Jean Castex said that, going forward, schoolchildren in the country would be allowed to do self-tests instead of a P.C.R. test if one of their classmates tested positive, in an attempt to keep the education system functioning.

“If we were to shut down classes as soon as there is one first case, bearing in mind the explosion of Omicron, all French schools would be closed in a matter of days,” Mr. Castex told France 2 television.

While much of the public discussion has revolved around whether this was the moment when governments should shift policies and restrictions to treat the coronavirus as an endemic disease — removing most restrictions and allowing people to manage risk in a way similar to the way they do with influenza — the W.H.O. said it was too early to call this virus endemic.

Catherine Smallwood, a W.H.O. senior emergencies officer, said that one of the key factors in declaring the virus to be endemic was some sense of predictability.

“We are still ways off,” she said. “We still have a huge amount of uncertainty.”

Dr. Kluge added that there were simply too many unknown factors, including exactly how severe Omicron is for unvaccinated people and how high the risk is of infection leading to “long Covid” symptoms.

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SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/double-diagnosis-worries-doctors-across-sound/PBLTDNBTJRD7TGGVVIQQRWXY4/
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Flu cases are on the rise across Washington, and doctors say it's only a matter of time before a patient finds themselves infected with influenza and COVID-19 at the same time.</p> <p>"We just don't know how these viruses interact," says Dr. Joshua Liao with the University of Washington. "I think that somewhere between not having flu last year to learn from and having these new variants of covid, we have to be very careful about that."</p> <p>Dr. Liao adds the unvaccinated are at most risk should they contract both viruses simultaneously.</p> <p>"People can become dually infected or super infected where one infection suppresses or weakens a person's immune system and then another infection can take hold," he said.</p> <p>"Yeah, I think they are reasonably concerned about getting both together," says Dr. Christopher Dale with Swedish.</p> <p>He worries what could happen if flu cases start to rapidly increase</p> <p>"If we were to add let's say a very bad flu surge like we had back in 2009 with H1N1 that would tremendously overwhelm an already overburdened healthcare system," Dale said.</p> <p>The best way to prevent that from happening, both doctors say everyone should get vaccinated against both viruses.</p> <p>"It's definitely an important part of helping to serve our fellow human beings to get vaccinated for both flu and for covid," Dale said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Mountain passes reopen; stores restock
SOURCE	https://komonews.com/news/local/reopening-of-mountain-passes-means-stores-may-be-able-to-restock-depleted-shelves
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — Interstate 90 at Snoqualmie Pass is a key transportation route that allows for the delivery of supplies to travel across the Cascades.</p> <p>When winter weather resulted in the closure of all of the mountain passes the move left some grocery stores and food banks struggling to keep up with demand as store shelves sat empty for days.</p> <p>"Some of the bread products have been delayed, [as well as] some of our chips," said Paul Kapioski, owner of Thriftway West Seattle Owner. "Chicken was a big issue because that comes from the Midwest."</p> <p>Many super markets had bare shelves on their bread aisles while some stores reported that their dairy sections were also depleted.</p> <p>Kapioski said his store had to get creative in order to restock faster.</p> <p>"We have a lot of orders in the pipeline right now," he said. "We're hoping to get three different trucks in tonight. And we're buying from a lot of different vendors wherever we can find a product,"</p> <p>Store workers said deliveries were held up during the closure that began Thursday at Snoqualmie Pass.</p> <p>In the days since the passes reopened, big rigs were able to travel on the routes again, even on a narrow two-lane stretch of I-90.</p>

	<p>"We are frantically trying to get supplies over," said Tammie Hetrick, CEO of the Washington Food Industry Association, which is urging customers to not resort to panic buying. "Distribution centers are trying to get the food back to the stores (and) trying to get those shelves restocked."</p> <p>The food group said the days-long closures of all four main passes has had a significant impact on the supply chain for stores statewide, but they're still trying to figure out the extent of it.</p> <p>The severe weather also impacting other places that take in food shipments, like the Food Lifeline, a non-profit that works to feed the hungry through donations from grocery stores. The group is currently helping about 350 food pantries to provide meals across Washington.</p> <p>"We want to turn this food as quickly as possible," said Mark Coleman, spokesman for the charitable group. "Right now, we're backed up and it'll probably take us another week or two to get out all of that food,"</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Seattle schools record number cases
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/seattle-public-schools-reports-record-high-704-covid-cases-in-just-a-weeks-time
GIST	<p>SEATTLE - Seattle Public Schools' most recent COVID-19 dashboard update showed a massive spike in coronavirus cases across the school district.</p> <p>According to the data table, 704 people contracted COVID-19 in just a week's time, including 145 staff members and 643 students.</p> <p>This comes just a week after students returned to class from winter break, and as many area schools and universities weigh a return to online learning amid another wave of coronavirus.</p> <p>The surge in COVID cases is far and away the largest since the district's dashboard was started in Sep. 2020. For comparison, the next-largest spike was between Dec. 11-17 at 139 cases, followed by 103 cases just a week later.</p> <p>The table shows 902 cases have been confirmed in the last two weeks.</p> <p>Schools with the highest number of cases currently include Franklin High School at 94 cases, Roosevelt High School at 83, Ballard High School at 80 and Nathan Hale High School at 72.</p> <p>You can find the full, up-to-date dashboard on the Seattle Public Schools website.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Recall: prepackaged salads
SOURCE	https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/food/2022/01/10/salad-recall-2022-dole-lettuce-listeria-risk/9155118002/
GIST	<p>Dole Fresh Vegetables, Inc. is voluntarily recalling dozens of types of prepackaged salad for a "possible health risk" from listeria from dozens of states.</p> <p>The recall comes weeks after the company had a similar recall in December and one in October.</p> <p>According to the Jan. 7 recall notice posted on the Food and Drug Administration's website, the affected products are Dole-branded and private label packaged salads processed at its Springfield, Ohio and Soledad, California production facilities.</p> <p>Consumers are advised to throw out the recalled items and not to eat them. Affected store brands include Walmart's Marketside brand, Aldi's Little Salad Bar, Kroger, H-E-B and Presidents Choice.</p>

HEADLINE	01/11 WHO: Covid not endemic illness like flu
SOURCE	https://www.newsmax.com/health/health-news/who-covid-warns-flu-treatment/2022/01/11/id/1051847/
GIST	<p>The World Health Organization (WHO) on Tuesday warned against treating COVID-19 as an endemic illness like flu, rather than as a pandemic, saying the spread of the omicron variant has not yet stabilized.</p> <p>Spain's Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said on Monday it may be time to change how it tracks COVID-19's evolution to instead use a method similar to how it follows the flu, because its lethality has fallen. That would imply treating the virus as an "endemic illness," rather than a pandemic.</p> <p>"We still have a huge amount of uncertainty and a virus that is evolving quite quickly, imposing new challenges. We are certainly not at the point where we are able to call it endemic," WHO's senior emergency officer for Europe, Catherine Smallwood, told a press briefing.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 WEF report: risks to global economy
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/climate-technology-health-business-environment-and-nature-b2e44f9612a4bffc52a41b94dda2d6a0
GIST	<p>LONDON (AP) — Cybersecurity and space are emerging risks to the global economy, adding to existing challenges posed by climate change and the coronavirus pandemic, the World Economic Forum said in a report Tuesday.</p> <p>The Global Risks Report is usually released ahead of the annual elite winter gathering of CEOs and world leaders in the Swiss ski resort of Davos, but the event has been postponed for a second year in a row because of COVID-19. The World Economic Forum still plans some virtual sessions next week.</p> <p>Here's a rundown of the report, which is based on a survey of about 1,000 experts and leaders:</p> <p>WORLD OUTLOOK</p> <p>As 2022 begins, the pandemic and its economic and societal impact still pose a "critical threat" to the world, the report said. Big differences between rich and poor nations' access to vaccines mean their economies are recovering at uneven rates, which could widen social divisions and heighten geopolitical tensions.</p> <p>By 2024, the global economy is forecast to be 2.3% smaller than it would have been without the pandemic. But that masks the different rates of growth between developing nations, whose economies are forecast to be 5.5% smaller than before the pandemic, and rich countries, which are expected to expand 0.9%.</p> <p>DIGITAL DANGERS</p> <p>The pandemic forced a huge shift — requiring many people to work or attend class from home and giving rise to an exploding number of online platforms and devices to aid a transformation that has dramatically increased security risks, the report said.</p> <p>"We're at the point now where cyberthreats are growing faster than our ability to effectively prevent and manage them," said Carolina Klint, a risk management leader at Marsh, whose parent company Marsh McLennan co-authored the report with Zurich Insurance Group and SK Group.</p> <p>Cyberattacks are becoming more aggressive and widespread, as criminals use tougher tactics to go after more vulnerable targets, the report said. Malware and ransomware attacks have boomed, while the rise of cryptocurrencies makes it easy for online criminals to hide payments they have collected.</p>

While those responding to the survey cited cybersecurity threats as a short- and medium-term risk, Klint said the report's authors were concerned that the issue wasn't ranked higher, suggesting it's a "blind spot" for companies and governments.

SPACE RACE

Space is the final frontier — for risk.

Falling costs for launch technology has led to a new space race between companies and governments. Last year, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos' space tourism venture Blue Origin and Virgin Galactic's Richard Branson took off, while Elon Musk's Space X business made big gains in launching astronauts and satellites.

Meanwhile, a host of countries are beefing up their space programs as they chase geopolitical and military power or scientific and commercial gains, the report said.

But all these programs raise the risk of frictions in orbit.

"Increased exploitation of these orbits carries the risk of congestion, an increase in debris and the possibility of collisions in a realm with few governance structures to mitigate new threats," the report said.

Space exploitation is one of the areas that respondents thought had among the least amount of international collaboration to deal with the challenges.

Experts and leaders responding to the survey "don't believe that much is being done in the best possible way moving forward," World Economic Forum's managing director, Saadia Zahidi, said at a virtual press briefing from Geneva.

Other areas include artificial intelligence, cyberattacks and migration and refugees, she said.

CLIMATE CRISIS

The environment remains the biggest long-term worry.

The planet's health over the next decade is the dominant concern, according to survey respondents, who cited failure to act on climate change, extreme weather, and loss of biodiversity as the top three risks.

The report noted that different countries are taking different approaches, with some moving faster to adopt a zero-carbon model than others. Both approaches come with downsides. While moving slowly could radicalize more people who think the government isn't acting urgently, a faster shift away from carbon intense industries could spark economic turmoil and throw millions out of work.

"Adopting hasty environmental policies could also have unintended consequences for nature," the report added. "There are still many unknown risks from deploying untested biotechnical and geoengineering technologies."

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HEADLINE	01/11 Ethiopia drone strike kills 17 in Tigray
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-africa-kenya-ethiopia-abiy-ahmed-33a1c6942729a5b7c72fe9c614389fd1
GIST	NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — An Ethiopian drone strike has killed 17 civilians in the country's Tigray region on the day that President Joe Biden during a call with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed expressed concern about such attacks in the ongoing war, local authorities say.

A report by the zonal administration said women at a flour-grinding mill made up most of those killed in the Monday drone strike near Mai Tsebri, a source who saw the report told The Associated Press. The source spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak about it to reporters.

Such drone strikes have been reported almost daily in Tigray, a humanitarian worker in the town of Shire told the AP, with an attack over the weekend on a displaced persons camp in Dedebeit killing at least 57 people and wounding more than 130, many of them children. The aid worker shared photos of partially charred bodies and small corpses laid out on the ground.

A spokesman for Ethiopia's government and military didn't respond to questions about Monday's drone strike.

Biden expressed concerns in Monday's phone call with Ethiopia's prime minister about detentions and civilian killings in the war against Tigray forces, while commending Abiy for the release of several high-profile political prisoners.

The White House said Biden raised to Abiy the airstrikes that continue to cause civilian casualties and suffering in Africa's second most populous nation.

The statement added that the leaders "discussed ways to accelerate dialogue toward a negotiated cease-fire, the urgency of improving humanitarian access across Ethiopia, and the need to address the human rights concerns of all affected Ethiopians, including concerns about detentions of Ethiopians under the state of emergency."

Abiy on Twitter described the conversation with Biden as "candid" and both agreed "there is great value in strengthening our cooperation through constructive engagement founded on mutual respect."

The call was requested by Biden after Jeffrey Feltman, the outgoing U.S. special envoy to the Horn of Africa, visited Ethiopia last week for talks with senior leaders.

The more than yearlong war has created a devastating humanitarian crisis. The conflict entered a new phase in late December when Tigray forces retreated into their region amid a new military offensive and Ethiopian forces said they would not advance further there.

Biden stressed to Abiy that the two sides must take advantage of the moment and called on the Ethiopian leader to improve humanitarian access, according to a senior administration official who briefed reporters on the leaders' call on the condition of anonymity. White House officials are concerned that if momentum is not maintained, the conflict—which has left thousands dead and hundreds of thousands facing famine—could further deteriorate.

Ethiopia's government has sought to restrict reporting on the conflict and detained some journalists, including a video freelancer accredited to the AP, Amir Aman Kiyaro.

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HEADLINE	01/11 Yemen claims southern province retaken
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-iran-saudi-arabia-yemen-houthis-66733bc7ada63559212b9efebb2606da
GIST	<p>CAIRO (AP) — Forces of Yemen's internationally recognized government have reclaimed the entire southern province of Shabwa from Iran-backed Houthi rebels, officials said Tuesday. The development is a blow to the rebels after government forces earlier this month made significant advances in the country's south.</p> <p>The government, aided by allies from a pro-government militia, the Giants Brigades, and airstrikes from the Saudi-led coalition, pushed through Shabwa this month, retaking the entire province in a 10-day battle, officials said.</p>

	<p>Military spokesman, Mohammed al-Naqib, said they have achieved “all targets” and pushed the Houthis out of the districts of Ain, Usailan and Bayhan.</p> <p>Gov. Awad al-Awlaki also announced the “liberation of Shabwa,” thanking Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — which fund the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Houthis.</p> <p>There was no immediate comment from the Houthis, but two rebel leaders acknowledged to The Associated Press that they lost control of Shabwa. The rebels fled to nearby central provinces of Bayda and Marib, said the two, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media.</p> <p>Taking Shabwa would enable government forces to cut major supply lines for the Houthis, who have been attacking the key city of Marib, the last government stronghold in northern Yemen, since early last year. The rebels have repeatedly pushed back against U.N. and U.S. diplomatic efforts to halt the Marib offensive, as well as rebel missile and drone attacks on Saudi Arabia.</p> <p>U.N.-led efforts for negotiations have failed to make significant progress in the yearslong conflict in Yemen. The civil war began in 2014, when the Houthis took the capital, Sanaa, and much of northern Yemen, forcing the government to flee to the south, then to exile in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi-led coalition, backed at the time by the U.S., entered the war months later to try restoring the government to power.</p> <p>The conflict has since become a regional proxy war that has killed tens of thousands of civilians and fighters. The war also created the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, leaving millions suffering from food and medical care shortages and pushing the country to the brink of famine.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 WHO: 7M new cases Europe last week
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-denmark-western-europe-world-health-organization-0cd236bec88830d3e578e670aad84da8
GIST	<p>COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — There were more than 7 million new cases of the omicron variant of COVID-19 across Europe in the first week of January, more than doubling in just two weeks, the World Health Organization said.</p> <p>WHO Europe director Dr. Hans Kluge said at a media briefing on Tuesday that 26 countries in its region reported that more than 1% of their populations are being infected with COVID-19 each week, warning there is now a “closing window of opportunity” for countries to prevent their health systems from being overwhelmed.</p> <p>He cited estimates from the Institute of Health Metrics at the University of Washington that projected half of the population in Western Europe will be infected with COVID-19 in the next six to eight weeks.</p> <p>“Omicron moves faster and wider than any (previous) variant we have seen,” he said. Kluge called for countries to mandate the use of masks indoors and to prioritize vaccination, including booster doses, of at-risk populations, including health workers and older people. WHO’s Geneva headquarters has previously pleaded with rich countries not to offer booster doses and to donate them instead to poorer countries where vulnerable groups have yet to be immunized.</p> <p>Kluge said he was greatly concerned that as omicron moves east across the European continent, the variant will take a much higher toll on countries with lower vaccination coverage rates. In Denmark, he noted the coronavirus hospitalization rate was six times higher in people who weren’t vaccinated compared to those who had been immunized.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Health officials: infected staff stay at work
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SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-business-health-arizona-california-0113146dc7b8fd8a5b6a5624d8e0e30c
GIST	<p>Health authorities around the U.S. are increasingly taking the extraordinary step of allowing nurses and other workers infected with the coronavirus to stay on the job if they have mild symptoms or none at all.</p> <p>The move is a reaction to the severe hospital staffing shortages and crushing caseloads that the omicron variant is causing.</p> <p>California health authorities announced over the weekend that hospital staff members who test positive but are symptom-free can continue working. Some hospitals in Rhode Island and Arizona have likewise told employees they can stay on the job if they have no symptoms or just mild ones.</p> <p>The highly contagious omicron variant has sent new cases of COVID-19 exploding to over 700,000 a day in the U.S. on average, obliterating the record set a year ago. The number of Americans in the hospital with the virus is running at about 110,000, just short of the peak of 124,000 last January.</p> <p>Many hospitals are not only swamped with cases but severely shorthanded because of so many employees out with COVID-19.</p> <p>At the same time, omicron appears to be causing milder illness than the delta variant.</p> <p>Last month, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said that health care workers who have no symptoms can return to work after seven days with a negative test, but that the isolation time can be cut further if there are staffing shortages.</p> <p>France last week announced it is allowing health care workers with mild or no symptoms to keep treating patients rather than isolate.</p> <p>In the Phoenix area, Dignity Health, a major hospital operator, sent a memo to staff members saying those infected with the virus who feel well enough to work may request clearance from their managers to go back to caring for patients. Dignity Health hospitals in California have not yet implemented the new guidelines but said it may need to do so in the coming days and weeks.</p> <p>“We are doing everything we can to ensure our employees can safely return to work while protecting our patients and staff from the transmissibility of COVID-19,” Dignity Health said in a statement.</p> <p>In California, the Department of Public Health said the new policy was prompted by “critical staffing shortages.” It asked hospitals to make every attempt to fill openings by bringing in employees from outside staffing agencies.</p> <p>Also, infected workers will be required to wear extra-protective N95 masks and should be assigned to treat other COVID-19-positive patients, the department said.</p> <p>“We did not ask for this guidance, and we don’t have any information on whether hospitals will adopt this approach or not,” said Jan Emerson-Shea, a spokesperson for the California Hospital Association. “But what we do know is that hospitals are expecting many more patients in the coming days than they’re going to be able to care for with the current resources.”</p> <p>Emerson-Shea said many hospital workers have been exposed to the virus, and are either sick or caring for family members who are.</p> <p>The 100,000-member California Nurses Association came out against the decision and warned it will lead to more infections.</p>

	<p>Gov. Gavin Newsom and other state health leaders “are putting the needs of health care corporations before the safety of patients and workers,” Cathy Kennedy, the association’s president, said in a statement. “We want to care for our patients and see them get better — not potentially infect them.”</p> <p>Earlier this month in Rhode Island, a state psychiatric hospital and a rehabilitation center allowed staff who tested positive for COVID-19 but were asymptomatic to work.</p> <p>At Miami’s Jackson Memorial Hospital, chief medical officer Dr. Hany Atallah said they are not yet at the breaking point and that workers who test positive are staying away for five days. “We still have to be very careful to prevent spread in the hospital,” he said.</p> <p>Kevin Cho Tipton, a nurse at Jackson Memorial, said he understands why hospitals are eager to have employees come back after five days of isolation. Yet he worries about the potential risk, especially for patients at higher risk of infection, such as those receiving transplants.</p> <p>“Yes, omicron is less deadly, but we still don’t know much,” he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Extreme cold grips Northeast
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/environment-and-nature-new-york-boston-new-york-city-maine-150620f0d2f43f6d487d19b3d3e82a7f
GIST	<p>BOSTON (AP) — The Northeast girded Tuesday for extreme cold that was expected to reach a wind chill value of minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 40 Celsius) in some northern areas and closed some schools elsewhere.</p> <p>Boston’s public school system, the largest in Massachusetts, announced Monday that schools will not open on Tuesday because of expected extremely cold temperatures. The high in the city Tuesday is expected to be 12 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 11 C), with wind chills making it feel as low as minus 8 (minus 22 C), according to National Weather Service forecasters.</p> <p>New York City, too, was in for subzero temperatures with wind chill factored in, the weather service warned.</p> <p>It could feel as low as minus 15 F (minus 26 C) in some areas of Massachusetts, according to the weather service. And it could be even colder elsewhere in New England, as forecasters said wind chill could approach minus 40 F (minus 40 C) in some parts of western Maine.</p> <p>Low temperatures below zero, not including the wind chill, are also expected in Burlington, Vermont, and Concord, New Hampshire. Forecasters said Providence, Rhode Island, should expect a wind chill value of as low as minus 1 degree Fahrenheit (minus 17 C).</p> <p>Low temperatures can result in frostbite to exposed skin in as little as 30 minutes.</p> <p>The New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services announced Monday that four COVID-19 testing sites overseen by the state would be closed Tuesday because of the cold. The sites are in Claremont, Manchester, Nashua and Newington.</p> <p>Central Maine Power said it is encouraging customers to weather strip windows and open drapes to let in heat from the sun and allow sunlight to reduce reliance on electricity during the cold spell.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Red Cross: first ever national blood crisis
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/blood-crisis-red-cross/

GIST	<p>The nation's blood supply is dangerously low, prompting the Red Cross to announce a national blood crisis for the first time.</p> <p>The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a decline in donor turnout, the cancellation of blood drives and staffing challenges, leading to the worst blood shortage in more than a decade, the Red Cross said. Last year, the Red Cross saw a 34% decline in new donors.</p> <p>"If the nation's blood supply does not stabilize soon, life-saving blood may not be available for some patients when it is needed," it warned in a joint statement with America's Blood Centers and the Association for the Advancement of Blood and Biotherapies.</p> <p>Blood centers across the U.S. have reported less than a one-day supply of some blood types, the statement added.</p> <p>Hospitals need blood for surgeries, transplants, cancer treatments and chronic illnesses, but the Red Cross says that during this historic shortage, there are days it can't give hospitals all of the blood products they request. The shortage means doctors are being forced to make tough decisions about who should get blood and who needs to wait until there is more supply.</p> <p>No 11-year-old should have to worry about the nation's blood supply. But Dreylan Holmes does — he has sickle cell disease and needs blood transfusions.</p> <p>"Sometimes I can't do things when I'm hurting, like sometimes I can't get out of bed," Holmes said of how the disease affects him.</p> <p>He experienced that just before Thanksgiving. Holmes was severely anemic and needed a transfusion, but was forced to wait for two days because of limited blood supply at the hospital.</p> <p>"It didn't feel good having to wait when I was in pain," he said.</p> <p>His mother, Vesha Jamison, said the wait was "very scary."</p> <p>"That was actually the first time that we didn't know when the blood was coming," Jamison said.</p> <p>Dr. Jennifer Andrews, the medical director of the Vanderbilt University Medical Center blood bank, said the hospital's blood supply is dire. A lower blood supply means the hospital can't care for patients in the same way, Andrews said.</p> <p>"Nobody wakes up in the morning and plans on being the next trauma patient. So this literally could affect you or your family members and your loved ones," she said.</p> <p>Holmes encouraged those who are thinking about donating blood to do it.</p> <p>"You should to help other people like me, so we could get to feeling better," he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 New year, same story at TSA checkpoints
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/transportation/new-year-same-old-story-at-tsa-checkpoints/
GIST	<p>Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officers across the country had a record year for firearm detections last year, and 2022 is continuing in much the same vein.</p> <p>On the first day of the year, TSA officers at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport prevented a man from bringing a gun onto his flight after he was caught with a .40 caliber handgun loaded with six bullets at one of the airport's checkpoints. The gun was spotted while the man's belongings were in the X-ray</p>

machines. TSA alerted the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority police who confiscated the guns and ammunition and cited the man.

On January 3, TSA officers stopped a woman from carrying a firearm onto an airplane at Boston Logan International Airport. It was the first detection by TSA officers at a Boston Logan security checkpoint this year. Last year, the airport did not have its first gun detection until mid-May.

During security screening in the afternoon of January 3, a TSA officer detected the unloaded .380 caliber firearm in the woman's carry-on bag. TSA officers immediately alerted the Massachusetts State Police who responded and discovered the woman's firearm permit was expired. The state trooper took possession of the firearm and issued the Massachusetts resident a citation. She was eventually cleared to fly.

"It's unfortunate that we already have a gun that was brought to the checkpoint so early in the new year," said Bob Allison, TSA's Federal Security Director for Massachusetts. "Carelessly traveling with a firearm is a public safety concern, considering it could accidentally be discharged during a search. I strongly urge all gun owners to ensure they know where their firearm is before traveling to the airport."

January 6 was a particularly busy day for TSA officers. A man was cited by police after Transportation Security Administration (TSA) officers prevented him from carrying a loaded handgun and knife onto his flight at Richmond International Airport. The .40 caliber gun and the knife were spotted inside the man's carry-on bag when a TSA officer who was staffing the checkpoint X-ray monitor spotted the weapons. The gun was loaded with 13 bullets. TSA then alerted the police who confiscated the handgun and knife and cited the man on weapons charges.

The same day, TSA officers prevented a handgun from making its way onboard an airplane at Milwaukee Mitchell International Airport. During the routine screening of carry-on luggage, a TSA officer spotted the image of a handgun on the X-ray screen. The incident occurred around 10 a.m., and TSA officials immediately alerted the Milwaukee County Sheriff's Office. A deputy responded to the checkpoint, confiscated the firearm, which was loaded, and issued a citation.

Also on January 6, a local man was arrested by police after he was prevented from carrying a loaded handgun onto his flight at Newark Liberty International Airport. The gun was spotted inside the man's carry-on bag when a TSA officer who was staffing the checkpoint X-ray monitor spotted the weapon. TSA then alerted Port Authority Police who confiscated the handgun and arrested the man on weapons charges.

"It's 2022 and the law regarding the prohibition of guns in airplanes has been in place for decades. This is nothing new," said Thomas Carter, TSA's Federal Security Director for New Jersey. "Let me be perfectly clear. Guns are not permitted to be carried onto planes. Not if they are loaded. Not if they are unloaded. Not even if you have a concealed carry permit. Under no circumstances are travelers permitted to bring guns through our security checkpoints. Our TSA officers are very good at detecting weapons from getting through the checkpoints."

Passengers are permitted to travel with firearms only in checked baggage if they are properly packaged and declared at their airline ticket counter. Firearms must be unloaded, packed in a hard-sided locked case, and packed separately from ammunition. Then the locked case should be taken to the airline check-in counter to be declared. TSA has details on how to properly travel with a firearm posted on its website.

Bringing a gun to an airport checkpoint carries a federal civil penalty because TSA reserves the right to issue a civil penalty to travelers who have guns and gun parts with them at a checkpoint. Civil penalties for bringing a handgun into a checkpoint can stretch into thousands of dollars, depending on mitigating circumstances. This applies to travelers with or without concealed gun carry permits because even though an individual may have a concealed carry permit, it does not allow for a firearm to be carried onto an airplane. The complete list of civil penalties is posted online. Additionally, if a traveler with a gun is a member of TSA PreCheck®, that individual will lose their TSA PreCheck privileges.

	Firearm possession laws vary by state and locality and TSA urges passengers to do their homework to make sure that they are not violating any local firearm laws. Travelers should also contact their airline as they may have additional requirements for traveling with firearms and ammunition.
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HEADLINE	01/10 Community Risk Reduction Week 2022
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/emergency-preparedness/raise-community-risk-reduction-awareness-during-crr-week-2022/
GIST	<p>CRR Week is a grass-roots effort by an informal group of fire safety professionals from across the nation.</p> <p>The idea is to help promote the awareness of Community Risk Reduction within the fire service by having a week where everyone can do CRR programs and demonstrate its importance to the fire service.</p> <p>CRR Week 2022 kicks off on Martin Luther King Day, a National Day of Service, which is Monday, January 17, 2022. It runs through Sunday, January 23.</p> <p>A community risk reduction (CRR) program can help your department take what you already know (are probably already doing!) and intentionally focus knowledge and activities to lower the all-hazards risks within your area of operation.</p> <p>Fire departments are uniquely positioned to know their communities better than most other organizations. Firefighters and emergency medical services responders see firsthand, whether through medical calls, inspections or simply driving through the community, how people live and the needs they have.</p> <p>It's a great opportunity to help raise awareness among members of your department about the value of CRR in making your community safer, which firefighters safer.</p>
Return to Top	Read more at CRR Week

HEADLINE	01/10 Vaccine mandate off to shaky start
SOURCE	https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2022-01-10/states-uncertain-as-biden-vaccine-or-test-mandate-takes-effect
GIST	<p>The first stage of the Biden administration's vaccine-or-test mandate for employees at large companies began Monday. But without word yet from the Supreme Court on pending challenges to the rule, some state leaders were left to take matters into their own hands.</p> <p>The Supreme Court on Friday heard nearly four hours of arguments over two of the Biden administration's vaccine requirements – cases that will have implications for some tens of millions of workers nationwide and for the president's contentious strategy to combat the virus. The justices appeared skeptical of the requirements but seemed more open to a mandate for health care workers than the vaccine rule for private companies with more than 100 employees.</p> <p>In lieu of a ruling from the justices, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration began implementing its rule for private companies Monday – although to a limited extent.</p> <p>Still, some state leaders are acting ahead of a decision from the Supreme Court.</p> <p>Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds, a Republican, announced Friday that the state's labor commission had submitted a notice that Iowa will not be adopting or enforcing the mandate.</p> <p>“We are going to continue to protect the freedoms and liberties of Iowans,” Reynolds said in a statement. “The Biden Administration continues to ignore the constitutional rights afforded to all Americans, which our country was built on. Instead, they’d rather dictate health care decisions and eliminate personal choice, causing our businesses and employees to suffer and exacerbating our workforce shortage.”</p>

Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson likewise said Sunday that large businesses should not comply with the Biden administration's vaccine-or-test rule while they await a Supreme Court decision, insisting that the choice should be left up to businesses.

"This mandate of OSHA, of the federal government, needs to be struck down," Hutchinson said on CNN's "State of the Union." "And that's why we're fighting against it. And I expect the Supreme Court, hopefully, to rule against the Biden administration on that oppressive vaccine mandate."

The states are among at least two dozen that have sued the Biden administration over the vaccine rule in recent months. The rule applies to an estimated 84 million people and requires employers with more than 100 workers to mandate vaccination or face weekly testing and a masking requirement. In November, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals temporarily halted the rule. But last month, after the case was reassigned to the 6th Circuit, it was reinstated.

Although pushback has been consistent since President Joe Biden announced his administration's vaccine mandates as part of its coronavirus strategy, the Supreme Court's forthcoming decision poses a real threat to the White House's plan going forward.

Former Biden COVID-19 transition advisory board member Ezekiel Emanuel said on Sunday that vaccine mandates will be necessary for bringing vaccination levels up.

"We got voluntarily to about 60%, but to get beyond that we are going to need the employer mandate that OSHA's put out, the health care mandate that (the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services) has put out." Emanuel said on NBC's "Meet the Press." "The Supreme Court has to recognize that COVID in the workplace is a real health threat and really does affect many people. ... We will never get to 70%, 80% or 90% of the American population vaccinated without a mandate. It's just that simple."

In other areas, leaders are taking steps to protect the vaccine rule for private companies ahead of the Supreme Court's decision. The Illinois Department of Labor on Friday filed to adopt the federal OSHA vaccine-or-test standard, effective immediately. And New York City began requiring vaccinations for employees within the private sector through its own mandate, which goes further than the Biden administration's, late last month.

Although the vaccine-or-test rule began Monday, OSHA announced that just the first portion – which includes a masking requirement for workers who are unvaccinated – is in effect, while the testing requirement will not be enforced until Feb. 9 "so long as an employer is exercising reasonable, good faith efforts to come into compliance with the standard."

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HEADLINE	01/10 Council briefing on SPD 'improper ruse'
SOURCE	https://www.capitolhillseattle.com/2022/01/council-committee-to-hear-briefing-on-seattle-polices-improper-ruse-at-chop/
GIST	<p>Tuesday, the Public Safety and Human Services Committee of the Seattle City Council will be briefed by Andrew Myerberg, director of the city's Office of Police Accountability, and Senior Deputy Mayor Monisha Harrell on the findings released last week that police leadership signed off on a dangerous disinformation ploy targeting demonstrators as the CHOP protest zone formed in the summer of 2020.</p> <p>The morning session will also include the first opportunity for public comment on the scandal in front of the council.</p> <p>As newly sworn-in Mayor Bruce Harrell and SPD Chief Adrian Diaz consider what actions should be taken over the findings, committee chair Lisa Herbold has called for "increased oversight of SPD's use of deceptive tactics, or ruses" in the wake of the report even as those directly responsible are unlikely to face punishment.</p>

	<p>The investigation lays the blame for the disinformation effort with two supervisors including an assistant chief who have since left the department, according to the report. Four officers who also participated should not be punished for their actions, the OPA concluded.</p> <p>CHS reported here on the findings from the oversight office that two Seattle Police commanders including an assistant chief and four officers shaped an “improper ruse” targeting demonstrators, the media, and the public in June 2020 with faked police radio reports describing a group of 20 to 30 armed right wing extremists roaming the streets of city and headed to Capitol Hill for a fight.</p> <p>The report confirmed allegations from activists and media that began to take shape even as the phony broadcasts were underway but has spawned greater concerns stemming from the involvement of high ranking officials in SPD who have since left the department.</p> <p>Tuesday’s session is described as a 30-minute “briefing and discussion” including OPA head Myerberg and Monisha Harrell, the mayor’s niece and part of the administration’s new team at City Hall.</p> <p>All council sessions are currently conducted via videoconference as the body takes up a new schedule in 2022.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 Singapore: Moderna best, Sinovac least
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/11/singapore-coronavirus-vaccine-moderna-sinovac-pfizer/
GIST	<p>In a real-world indicator of how coronavirus vaccines are performing, Singapore has released new figures suggesting shots produced by Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech are much more effective at preventing deaths than the Chinese-developed Sinopharm and Sinovac doses.</p> <p>Eight hundred and two people died of covid-19 in the city state in 2021, of which 555 were not fully vaccinated, while 247 received one of several locally available vaccines, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung told lawmakers on Monday.</p> <p>In terms of deaths per 100,000 people, there were 11 for those immunized with Sinovac and 7.8 for the Sinopharm vaccine, the state-affiliated Straits Times newspaper reported. The rate dropped for people who received messenger RNA — or mRNA — vaccines, with 6.2 deaths for Pfizer-BioNTech and one fatality for Moderna.</p> <p>“These rates are only indicative since they do not account for other factors which can affect mortality, such as the age and timing of vaccination,” Ong said Monday.</p> <p>While the sample size offered by Singapore is small, the data adds to concerns about the efficacy of so-called “inactivated virus” vaccines, which are in widespread use in China and much of the developing world. Such vaccines have a higher incidence of breakthrough infections and may be less effective against the highly transmissible omicron variant. (Major Chinese pharmaceutical companies, including Sinopharm and Sinovac, say they are working to create vaccines using mRNA technology.)</p> <p>The discrepancy in fatalities is also notable because the majority of Singapore’s residents received mRNA shots. Sinopharm is not covered by the Southeast Asian country’s national vaccine program and can only be administered via private clinics, while Singapore only made free Sinovac shots readily available in October.</p> <p>Malaysia’s health minister said this month that officials were studying whether a fourth shot may be necessary for residents originally vaccinated with Sinovac. Nearly half of all global vaccinations delivered so far are made by Chinese manufacturers.</p>

Singapore has one of the world's most highly vaccinated populations: It has fully immunized 87 percent of its 5.7 million residents, with 47 percent having also received booster doses. The country has, so far, sidestepped any major outbreak of the omicron variant. It has relied on vaccines and strict social-distancing measures to keep its trade-reliant economy open to the world, and prevent further border closures or a complete lockdown.

China has returned to its [harshest controls](#) in two years, as it seeks to contain omicron. The renewed lockdowns reflect official concerns about whether its vaccines can hold up against the variant.

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HEADLINE	01/11 China, Russia losing vaccine diplomacy
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/11/china-russia-omicron-vaccine/
GIST	<p>The spread of the omicron variant has hit the world of coronavirus vaccine diplomacy hard. And the impact will be felt most keenly in Beijing and Moscow, as Chinese and Russian vaccines struggle with data showing they are less effective against the fast-spreading variant, dimming hopes for wider global uptake of their product.</p> <p>The two most widely available Chinese coronavirus vaccines use technology that uses an inactivated version of the virus to produce an immune response — an older though more established technology than the messenger RNA platform used by vaccines widely available in the United States and Europe.</p> <p>However, some studies now suggest that two doses of these vaccines, which are produced by Sinopharm and Sinovac, may provide relatively lower protection against omicron. The Post's Eva Dou and Lyric Li reported Monday that China is facing the looming question of how to administer booster shots to its population of 1.4 billion, of whom more than 80 percent have been vaccinated, mostly with Sinopharm and Sinovac.</p> <p>But Chinese vaccines have also been widely distributed internationally, meaning concerns about their efficacy go far beyond Beijing's reach. In Singapore, the government said last week that even three doses of either Sinopharm or Sinovac would not be enough to confer fully vaccinated status and that fourth doses would now be required nine months after a third dose — already an extension of the initial regimen.</p> <p>If not, “your full vaccination status will lapse. This will amongst other things, affect your access to vaccination-differentiated venues such as malls, restaurants, libraries, etc.,” Singapore Health Minister Ong Ye Kung said Wednesday.</p> <p>The impact could stretch far wider. Since August, both Sinovac and Sinopharm have supplied a substantial amount of doses to Covax, the U.N.-backed global vaccine-sharing scheme. Some accounts suggest that nations receiving doses through the initiative are now less interested in the Chinese vaccines.</p> <p>Data compiled by UNICEF at the end of December showed that shipments of both Sinopharm and Sinovac sent out through bilateral or multilateral deals, bilateral donations and donations to Covax declined in the final months of 2021 — from a peak of over 100 million doses for each vaccine in the summer and early fall to roughly half that in November and December.</p> <p>Russia's major vaccine hope was Sputnik V. Moscow raced to put out that vaccine, which uses adenovirus viral vector technology, in 2020. Its backers now describe it as “the first registered vaccine against covid-19” in an aggressively proactive global marketing program.</p> <p>These backers, the Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology, and the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), are currently rejecting any suggestion that Sputnik V could provide weaker protection against omicron. An English-language Twitter account for Sputnik V has been posting multiple news stories highlighting rising cases in countries that do not use the Russian-backed vaccine.</p>

For Russia, Sputnik V has another pressing issue: a lack of international recognition. Unlike Sinopharm and Sinovac, the vaccine has not been given emergency use listing by the World Health Organization nor any major Western health authority.

Sputnik V's backers have suggested for months that approval is imminent. "We believe that we can supply Covax around 200 million doses a year, 200 to 300 million," RDIF CEO Kirill Dmitriev said in an interview with [the Associated Press in October](#). "We just need the WHO approval to work with Covax."

And for months, WHO officials have pushed back, initially citing a lack of required data from the vaccine developers. "The submission of data is expected by the end of December 2021, and I hope that the process will be completed speedily following this," WHO Europe Director Hans Kluge said in an interview with [Russian state media](#) late last month.

The lack of WHO emergency use approval has a significant impact. For example, many countries, including the United States, only accept travelers who have been fully vaccinated with a vaccine recognized by the WHO. And it isn't just [Russians who are impacted](#) by these rules — millions who received Sputnik V doses in Latin America would be impacted as well.

Not being on WHO's emergency use listing (EUL) is just one of Sputnik V's problems. There has also been [low uptake of the vaccine in Russia](#) and [international complaints](#) about the slow pace of deliveries. According to UNICEF data, less than 80 million doses of Sputnik V and its one-dose sister vaccine, Sputnik Light, were sent out internationally in 2021.

That's well behind the 528 million sent out by Sinopharm and the 729 million from Sinovac, the UNICEF data shows — and leagues away from the 1.5 billion Pfizer-BioNTech doses administered outside of the United States.

On one level, this looks like a major failure for Beijing and Moscow. China and Russia had linked their vaccine exports to foreign policy in a way that wasn't hard to miss: China would export doses to [countries that sided with it over Taiwan](#), for example, while Russia provided its [doses](#) to areas controlled by Moscow-backed rebels in Ukraine as Kyiv struggled to negotiate for alternative vaccines.

Both [Chinese](#) and [Russian](#) figures once questioned the safety of Western vaccines, including the popular mRNA vaccines like those made by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna. Now, Chinese firms are working on [their own mRNA vaccines](#) (a [Russian firm tried to develop one in 2020](#), but there are few details on what became of it).

But the United States and Europe have also tied their own vaccine donations to foreign policy goals. U.S. health officials working under President Donald Trump lobbied Brazil to [reject the Sputnik V vaccine](#) in 2020, according to a document later published by the Department of Health and Human Services, describing Russia as an "ill-intentioned state."

There had been hopes that Chinese and Russian vaccines could fill gaps left in global supply chains. But even before omicron, there were problems with that hypothesis. Countries with successful vaccination programs relying on Sinovac and Sinopharm saw [huge surges in cases this summer](#), undermining confidence in the Chinese vaccines.

And though RDIF has spoken of their ambition to supply Covax, the long undersupplied global vaccine initiative, that ambition has so far come to nothing — lack of WHO EUL has blocked that hope for now.

But if international demand for Chinese and Russian vaccines, along with other non-mRNA vaccines, continues to drop, more pressure could fall on Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna. Last week, a group of advocates released a report that [estimated that it could](#) take 22 billion doses of mRNA vaccines to slow the pandemic's spread in 2022. That's 15 billion more than current projections show.

	Such a scenario is arguably a win for U.S. and European vaccine diplomacy. But if any shortfall can't be made up by other doses, it would be a big loss for the world.
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HEADLINE	01/11 UN rebukes Kazakhstan 'blue helmets'
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/11/kazakhstan-protests-united-nations-helmet/
GIST	<p>The United Nations has rebuked Kazakhstan after the Central Asian country's troops were spotted wearing blue helmets reserved for U.N. peacekeepers during a violent crackdown on protesters last week.</p> <p>Stéphane Dujarric, a spokesman for the U.N. Secretary General, told reporters Monday that Kazakh authorities had said they would address the issue after the global body raised concerns. "Countries are to use U.N. insignia only when they are performing their mandated tasks as U.N. peacekeepers in the context of their deployment within a U.N. peacekeeping operation," he said.</p> <p>Blue helmets have become a symbol of the U.N.'s peacekeeping efforts since the 1950s. Kazakh authorities could have been attempting to portray the country's security forces as "representing a more international action" in an "attempt to draw on the unique legitimacy" that U.N. peacekeepers possess, said Charles Hunt, an international security expert at RMIT University in Australia.</p> <p>Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who ordered his security forces to "shoot to kill" demonstrators without warning, has tried to portray the protesters as foreign-backed "trained" terrorists attempting a coup. He has not presented substantive evidence to support his claim, though Tokayev has reestablished control of the country after inviting in a Russian-led military alliance to help him control the unrest. Russia has frequently deployed "peacekeepers" for extended periods to countries that Moscow fears are slipping out of its sphere of influence, often against the wishes of local leaders.</p> <p>The protests that broke out in early January in Central Asia's largest economy were initially directed against a drastic fuel-price hike, before drawing in people with grievances against Kazakhstan's sclerotic and autocratic political system. Many of the demonstrations were peaceful, but they spilled over into other parts of the country and became particularly bloody in Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city, where government buildings and cars were torched.</p> <p>At least 164 people have died in the upheaval, according to government officials, and some 9,900 have been detained, Russian news agency RIA reported Tuesday.</p> <p>Kazakhstan's ambassador to the United Nations said in a tweet that the pictured troops were members of a Ministry of Defense peacekeeping unit and had been deployed to protect infrastructure. Apart from the headgear, no other U.N.-marked equipment was used, he said.</p> <p>(Tokayev, the Kazakh president, served as a top U.N. official in Geneva from 2011 to 2013. Upon his appointment to the post, he was characterized as having "thorough knowledge" on disarmament issues and "extensive" management experience.)</p> <p>It is plausible but not convincing that the Kazakh service members wore the U.N. helmets because they were the only headgear readily available, said Hunt, the Australia-based expert.</p> <p>The smell of burning, the pop of gunfire and a flood of rumors — surviving in Kazakhstan's largest city during the unrest</p> <p>Under international law, the improper use of equipment bearing U.N. symbols in an international armed conflict could constitute a war crime. But Hunt said the law is not likely to be applicable in Kazakhstan since the bloody clashes are primarily a domestic affair.</p> <p>The U.N. Department of Peace Operations and Kazakhstan's Defense Ministry did not immediately return requests for comment.</p>

Whatever the intentions of the country's authorities, Kazakh troops wearing U.N. helmets might jeopardize the reputation and safety of authorized peacekeepers if they were culpable of rights violations, Hunt said.

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HEADLINE	01/10 Virginia limited state of emergency
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2022/01/10/northam-hospitals-emergency-virginia-covid/
GIST	<p>Gov. Ralph Northam on Monday issued a limited state of emergency for hospitals stretched dangerously thin amid historic surges in coronavirus caseloads.</p> <p>The provisions of the targeted 30-day state-of-emergency order will make technical changes to expand capacity and increase staffing at hospitals while they grapple with the pandemic, seasonal flu and a general increase in acuity after patients deferred care.</p> <p>“It has been a long 22 months for all of us,” Northam (D) said during a news conference. “It has been a roller coaster, and we are not built for this kind of uncertainty for this long. It has been hard on everyone.”</p> <p>Gov.-elect Glenn Youngkin (R), who takes office Saturday, could rescind the emergency order, but Northam expects it to have his support.</p> <p>“The governor has spoken with the governor-elect, and we’re hopeful he will keep this in place for the full 30 days or as long as necessary,” Northam spokeswoman Alena Yarmosky said Monday. “It’s very important given the fact that the transition’s taking place.”</p> <p>Youngkin “supports the use of tailored executive action that removes staffing barriers and provides healthcare providers the flexibility in order to deliver high-quality care and give overworked medical professionals the relief they need,” spokesman Devin O’Malley said in a statement Monday.</p> <p>The order waives certain regulations to increase bed capacity, allows providers with active licenses and in good standing to practice in Virginia, including through telemedicine, and allows physicians assistants with at least two years’ clinical experience to practice without written agreements. It grants more flexibility regarding vaccine administration and activates price-gouging protections for at-home antigen test kits.</p> <p>Virginia’s hospital crisis is in line with the rest of the region, which is seeing widespread surges. A 30-day state of emergency is also in effect in Maryland because of overburdened hospitals, and last week the D.C. Hospital Association called on Mayor Muriel E. Bowser (D) to reinstate D.C.’s public health emergency.</p> <p>Bowser said Monday that officials were still evaluating the association’s request and said it’s likely D.C. will need to take administrative actions to make sure hospitals can “operate nimbly.” She also expanded testing options: D.C. residents 65 and older can now pick up at-home rapid antigen tests at six senior wellness centers.</p> <p>Montgomery County, meanwhile, launched a free program Monday for residents to pick up rapid tests at library branches, similar to programs that have been implemented elsewhere in the region. County health spokeswoman Mary Anderson said there were long lines in the morning at some branches, as people started lining up before test distribution began at 11 a.m.</p> <p>“But once we got going, it moved very quickly,” she said.</p> <p>Anderson said she helped hand out about 1,200 tests within a half-hour at the White Oak branch. The Gaithersburg branch ran out before 2 p.m.</p>

Northam did not on Monday take broader emergency actions reminiscent of the first year of the pandemic, such as imposing an indoor mask mandate [like the one currently in place in D.C.](#), because, he said, vaccines offer widespread protection.

“This is not the virus we faced back in March 2020,” he said.

About 90 percent of Virginia adults and 78 percent of all Virginians have had at least one dose of a vaccine. Public health experts have said two vaccine doses plus a booster offer the best protection against the highly contagious omicron variant.

The biggest challenges facing the state — and nation — are overwhelmed hospitals, and the vast majority of their patients are not fully vaccinated or boosted, Northam said.

On Friday, Virginia hospitals hit a peak of 3,329 hospitalizations, surpassing the previous record of 3,201 on Jan. 13, 2021, [according to the Virginia Hospital and Healthcare Association](#). In the past month, covid-related hospitalizations are up about 200 percent.

D.C. Health emergency response leader Patrick Ashley said the District’s hospitals were operating at 83 percent capacity as of Sunday, which he called “not high.” But staffing shortages — as well as an influx of people [going to emergency rooms](#) for tests and mild coronavirus symptoms — have exacerbated strains on health-care facilities.

Pediatric hospitalizations are skyrocketing across the region and nationally. Although omicron does not appear to cause more severe illness than other variants, public health experts say the staggering rate of infection means a record number of children require hospitalization.

“We are seeing very high numbers of children with covid-19, and the best way to keep them out of the hospital is to get them vaccinated,” said Northam, a pediatric neurologist. He said when he returns to private practice Monday he will encourage his patients to get vaccinated.

Roberta Lynn DeBiasi, chief of pediatric infectious diseases at Children’s National Hospital in D.C., said about three times as many children are being admitted as in previous waves. The high Sunday was 67, including 20 in the critical care unit, she said.

Seventy percent of children admitted to Children’s National for the coronavirus are under 12 years old. Kids under 5, who are too young to be eligible for vaccination, make up the largest share, followed by those ages 5 to 11, of which only about [a quarter nationwide have received at least one vaccine dose](#), DeBiasi said.

She said the coronavirus is just as contagious in children as in adults, if not more so, but kids as a whole have a lower chance of being hospitalized and a lower mortality rate even if they are gravely ill. Of all children who test positive for the coronavirus, about 2 percent require hospitalization, national data shows.

[Unlike hospitals generally](#), DeBiasi said, Children’s National is not overwhelmed.

“We have plenty of beds,” she said. “We’re designed to take care of large numbers of kids with contagious diseases, so it’s not impacted our ability to care for the kids.”

Infection rates have been on the rise across the board for weeks because of the omicron variant. As of Monday, the seven-day average of new daily cases was up 53 percent in D.C., 27 percent in Virginia and 8 percent in Maryland compared with a week ago, according to [a Washington Post tracker](#).

The District on Friday reported that from Oct. 15 to Jan. 7, more than 59,000 rapid antigen test results were submitted to D.C. Health, including 6,728 that were “probable positive cases.” The District also reported 1,928 new confirmed positive cases from lab tests.

	<p>Asked why rapid test results are reported in a separate data set from the lab tests, Ashley, of D.C. Health, said the lab tests carry “a higher degree of confidence” than over-the-counter tests.</p> <p>“We take a lot of pride in using accurate data that’s reflective of what’s going on in the community,” he said.</p> <p>Ashley noted that even with the new antigen test kit option, seniors and residents with disabilities are given priority at testing and vaccination sites in the city.</p> <p>In Montgomery County, Gigi Diriba said there was a short line inside Silver Spring Library on Monday as people rushed to pick up last-minute tests before distribution closed. But the whole process, unlike other recent testing experiences of hers, took no more than 10 minutes.</p> <p>“I’ve been in several lines and didn’t feel safe waiting,” Diriba said. “I think this is a great policy to give out tests for free.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 DOH: 978,680 cases, 10,028 deaths
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/coronavirus/article257190672.html
GIST	<p>COVID-19 continued its record-breaking pace through Washington over the weekend, based on data released by the state Department of Health on Monday.</p> <p>The state recorded 13,689 new cases Monday and 24 new deaths since Friday. The state reported 14,871 cases on Saturday and 19,150 cases on Sunday — a record high.</p> <p>As of Monday, statewide totals from the illness caused by the coronavirus were 978,680 cases and 10,028 deaths. The case total included 114,616 infections listed as probable. In addition, the total case count could have as many as 2,500 duplicates that DOH is working to eliminate, it said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Another atmospheric river western Wash.
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/weather-news/article257190652.html
GIST	<p>Another atmospheric river will blast western Washington starting Monday night but most of it will hit north of Pierce County, according to the National Weather Service in Seattle.</p> <p>There will be no repeat of 2021’s snowy ending. Highs will be in the 50s, said weather service meteorologist Mike McFarland on Monday. Wednesday could see a high of 55 degrees in Tacoma and Olympia. While the Olympic Peninsula, King County and other points north will see the major impact of this week’s weather, there will still be close to a 100 percent chance of rain through Wednesday in Thurston and Pierce counties, McFarland said.</p> <p>Warm temperatures mean the snow level will be well above pass levels. While that’s good news for travelers still recovering from last week’s multi-day closures, it’s not the best conditions for skiers.</p> <p>There were no flood watches issued south of King County on Monday, but McFarland didn’t rule it out if rain totals in the Chehalis and Skookumchuck river watersheds were high enough.</p> <p>“But, I wouldn’t be surprised if later forecasts do have it coming up into that yellow action stage,” he said. Flooding on those rivers caused damage to areas of Centralia last week and led to the death and disappearance of two men in Grays Harbor County.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Flooding persists Pacific Northwest storms
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SOURCE	https://www.seattlepi.com/news/article/Flooding-persists-after-Pacific-Northwest-storms-16761384.php
GIST	<p>SEATTLE (AP) — Flooding coursed over roads, inundated farmland and curtailed access to a Native American reservation in Washington state on Sunday as the Pacific Northwest slowly recovered from a series of storms that have engulfed the region with rain and snow.</p> <p>The swollen Chehalis River was expected to crest Sunday as the region enjoyed a dry weekend after a series of winter storms since Dec. 17. Crews, meanwhile, worked to open several major highways connecting Seattle to the east that have been closed for days by heavy snow, avalanches and debris.</p> <p>Southwest Washington has experienced its worst flooding in a decade and some rivers crested at more than 18 feet (5.5 meters) last week, the National Weather Service said. Washington Gov. Jay Inslee issued an emergency proclamation on Friday.</p> <p>The weather service issued flood warnings Sunday for Grays Harbor and Thurston counties. It said moderate flooding in the Chehalis River was affecting road access to the Chehalis Reservation near Oakville. A flood warning continued for the Pudding River in Oregon's Clackamas and Marion counties.</p> <p>In Washington's Grays County, authorities were searching for a man reported missing after driving into floodwaters in Elma early Sunday, but it wasn't known if the man was swept away or walked out on his own, said Undersheriff Brad Johansson.</p> <p>The search came after emergency workers said Saturday they had recovered the body of a 72-year-old man whose vehicle was swept away by flooding near Cosmopolis.</p> <p>Crews worked to open several major highways connecting Seattle to the east, including Interstate 90 over Snoqualmie Pass and U.S. Highway 97 over Blewitt Pass, the Washington Department of Transportation said.</p> <p>U.S. 12 over White Pass may reopen Monday, the department said. But avalanche danger and multiple snowslides reaching 35 feet (10.5 meters) made it unlikely that a 44-mile (70 kilometer) stretch of U.S. 2 over Stevens Pass would reopen before Tuesday.</p> <p>At the eastern end of that stretch of U.S. 2, the National Guard was deployed to the hard-hit city village of Leavenworth in the Cascade Mountains for snow cleanup, food delivery and other services. Mayor Carl Florea asked for Guard help after the resort received 4 feet (6.4 meters) of snow in 48 hours last week.</p> <p>Kelly Kortman spent the last three days clearing snow off decks and roofs of four cabins in the area he rents to vacationers, trying to make sure they don't collapse.</p> <p>"It is a surreal state of affairs, it's beyond the pale," Kortman told The Seattle Times.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 China orders millions more into lockdown
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/11/millions-more-chinese-ordered-into-lockdown-to-fight-covid-outbreaks
GIST	<p>Millions more people in China have been ordered into lockdown and Hong Kong has banned transit passengers from 150 places as China continues to battle outbreaks across several provinces a few weeks before the Winter Olympics.</p> <p>China's national health commission reported 110 new locally transmitted Covid-19 cases for Monday, including 87 in Henan province, 13 in Shaanxi, and 10 in Tianjin.</p> <p>The cases in Henan, which include at least some of the highly transmissible Omicron variant, prompted the lockdown of five million residents in the city of Anyang on Monday evening. Anyang recorded 58 of</p>

the 87 Henan cases. At least two Omicron cases have been confirmed in the city in recent days, linked to [an outbreak in Tianjin](#), about 500km away.

Anyang residents have been ordered into their homes and banned from driving on the roads, according to the state news agency Xinhua. Non-essential businesses have been closed down. Also in Henan, Zhengzhou city has closed schools and kindergartens and barred in-restaurant dining, while Yuzhou remains in lockdown.

Xi'an city in northern China is in its third week of strict lockdown, while Shenzhen in the south has implemented targeted lockdowns of some housing compounds and launched a mass testing drive. Across numerous Chinese cities, public and long distance transport has been reduced or suspended, including multiple flights from the US.

Tianjin is of particular concern to authorities over its proximity to Beijing, and officials have pledged to fulfil the city's role as a "moat" to protect the capital. The origin of the Omicron strain is eluding officials. Zhang Ying, the deputy director of the city's CDC, recently said it may have been spreading "for some time" before it was detected.

With the Winter Olympics just around the corner, there are mounting concerns and rumours circulating about harsher restrictions to come. On Saturday a 39-year-old woman was arrested for allegedly disseminating false information about plans to shut down the popular Beijing party district Sanlitun, and on Tuesday the Beijing organising committee rejected rumours of plans to close some or all of the city during the games. Deputy director Huang Chun said the Omicron variant was spreading quickly around the world but the "closed loop" system for athletes, employees and others attending was running "smoothly" and there was no need to adjust it unless there was an outbreak within it.

In Hong Kong, where a relatively small number of Omicron cases have also been detected, authorities have reportedly planned to ban all international transit passengers coming from about 150 places. Bloomberg reported on Monday the ban would be extended to air passengers from "Group A" countries, which have been designated high-risk, from 15 January to 14 February. According to Bloomberg, diplomats, government officials, athletes and staff travelling to the Games would be exempt from the ban.

China is under pressure to maintain its official commitment to a [zero-Covid strategy](#) which has been challenged by the latest outbreaks and Omicron cases. As of December officials claimed to have fully vaccinated more than 82% of the population. However there are concerns that Omicron has a [substantial ability to evade immune responses](#) and current vaccines are less effective.

China uses Sinovac and Sinopharm, two domestically developed and produced vaccines based on inactivated viruses. Dr Daryl Cheng, medical leader for the Melbourne vaccine education centre, said there were concerns that these types of vaccines appear to have a higher rate of breakthrough infections with Omicron.

"We're stuck in a perfect storm at the moment where Omicron is significantly infectious, and in places like China where they may have a higher rate of breakthrough infections," Cheng told the Guardian. "It puts the population at significant risk of infection ... [and] if you're going for Covid-zero it puts higher strain on resources."

Cheng said Sinovac and Sinopharm – like all currently used vaccines – were developed before Omicron appeared, and so it was expected that they all would have reduced effectiveness, as happens with vaccines against new variations of the flu, which are adjusted each year.

"The question is whether or not further boosters of the same vaccine achieve greater effectiveness [against Omicron], versus needing to mix and match, versus developing a newer version of the traditional vaccine," he said.

	<p>“It’s a very complex and multifactorial discussion because you may not have the time or availability [to get it to people].”</p> <p>Some countries are giving a booster on top of citizens’ two doses with a different type of vaccine, often an mRNA type. China had indicated it would approve the mRNA vaccine developed by Pfizer for domestic use in 2021 but has not done so. There are no mRNA vaccines approved for use in China. Cheng said China may be developing an mRNA vaccine but Omicron was “spreading by the day”.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 US official: Pacific faces ‘strategic surprise’
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/11/pacific-faces-strategic-surprise-says-us-official-alluding-to-china
GIST	<p>The Pacific may be the part of the world most likely to see “strategic surprise”, the US Indo-Pacific coordinator Kurt Campbell has said, in comments apparently referring to possible Chinese ambitions to establish Pacific island bases.</p> <p>Campbell told Washington’s Center for Strategic and International Studies that the United States has “enormous moral, strategic, historical interests” in the Pacific but had not done enough to assist the region, unlike countries such as Australia and New Zealand.</p> <p>“If you look and if you ask me, where are the places where we are most likely to see certain kinds of strategic surprise – basing or certain kinds of agreements or arrangements – it may well be in the Pacific,” he told an Australia-focused panel.</p> <p>Campbell called it the issue he was “most concerned about over the next year or two”, adding: “And we have a very short amount of time, working with partners like Australia, like New Zealand, like Japan, like France, who have an interest in the Pacific, to step up our game across the board.”</p> <p>Campbell did not elaborate on his basing reference, but lawmakers from the Pacific island republic of Kiribati told Reuters last year that China has drawn up plans to upgrade an airstrip and bridge on one its remote islands about 3,000km (1,860 miles) south-west of the US state of Hawaii.</p> <p>Construction on the tiny island of Kanton would offer China a foothold deep in territory that had been firmly aligned to the United States and its allies since the second world war.</p> <p>Kiribati said in May the China-backed plans were a non-military project designed to improve transport links and bolster tourism.</p> <p>Campbell said ways the United States and its allies needed to do more in the Pacific included countering Covid-19, over the issue of fishing, and in investment in clean energy.</p> <p>Campbell followed up on remarks he made last week that Washington needed to “step up its game” on economic engagement in Asia.</p> <p>He said Australia had privately urged the United States to understand that as part of its strategic approach, it needed “a comprehensive, engaged, optimistic, commercial and trade role”.</p> <p>Campbell has touted the so-called Aukus pact, under which the United States and Britain have agreed to help Australia acquire nuclear submarines – as well as summits between the United States, Australia, India and Japan – as evidence that US partnerships are causing China “heartburn”.</p> <p>But some Indo-Pacific countries, many of which count China as their largest trading partner, have lamented what they consider insufficient US economic engagement after Donald Trump quit a trade deal now called the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.</p>

	<p>Biden told Asian leaders in October that Washington would launch talks on creating an Indo-Pacific economic framework, but few details have emerged and his administration has avoided moves towards rejoining trade deals that critics say threaten US jobs.</p> <p>Australia's Washington ambassador, Arthur Sinodinos, told the CSIS panel that Australia continued to raise the issue with the US Congress and "we haven't given up hope" of a reconsideration of US trade policy.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Sick workers add to manufacturing woes
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/omicron-workers-manufacturing-sick-covid-11641832497?mod=hp_lead_pos5
GIST	<p>The Covid-19 Omicron variant's spread among U.S. factory workers is slowing operations and stretching staff for manufacturers, leading some to consider unconventional, and sometimes expensive, solutions to keep operating.</p> <p>Mounting absences among Covid-infected workers are bringing masks back to some factory floors, executives said, while manufacturers shuttle available workers to jobs and plants where they are most needed. Companies are also redoubling recruiting efforts to fortify workforces already worn thin by high turnover in a tight job market.</p> <p>The speed at which the highly contagious variant is spreading has stunned some executives, who said they had grown increasingly confident over recent months that their companies had navigated the worst of the pandemic. The apparent decreasing severity of the variant is providing some hope that the number of cases will lighten and the effect on companies will abate in coming weeks. Some sidelined workers are quarantining at home as a precaution.</p> <p>Meanwhile, with demand booming for manufactured goods from automobiles to medical equipment, executives said that idling production now isn't an option. Manufacturers mostly have maintained operations since the start of the pandemic, in part because many operate in what are deemed essential industries.</p> <p>The surge in Covid-19 absenteeism threatens to deepen problems of supply-chain and transportation bottlenecks and delayed deliveries. A stretch of depleted workforces and lower production volumes also could fuel further cost increases and drive consumer inflation. Already, domestically made material input costs for manufacturers have grown at the fastest rate since the 1970s, up nearly 30% in November from a year earlier, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.</p> <p>A Jan. 5 report from the Institute for Supply Management showed that supply-chain pressures eased somewhat in December as deliveries improved from the extreme stress level recorded in November. The institute's overall index reading for manufacturing activity continued to signal expansion, but at a slower pace than in November.</p> <p>The U.S. manufacturing sector added 26,000 jobs last month, the Labor Department said Friday, the slowest growth in 6 months, which underscores companies' continuing struggles to hire enough workers. Covid-19 case counts in the U.S. reached record highs recently.</p> <p>When Boston Centerless Inc. opened on Tuesday after the New Year's holiday, six employees out of 120 called off work after contracting Covid-19 over the break or coming in close contact with somebody suspected of being infected, said Chief Executive Steven Tamasi.</p> <p>The Woburn, Mass., company, which specializes in grinding metal bars used in medical and dental implants and aerospace parts, also went through a round of infections just before Christmas, when about four employees were away from work.</p>

With demand strong, Mr. Tamasi said, many of his employees already are working 55 hours a week. The company's chief operating officer and director of operations made deliveries right before New Year's, when half of the six-person shipping department was sick or in quarantine.

"It's really damaging our ability to produce," said Mr. Tamasi, who said some employees had returned to work by the end of last week. "Our biggest challenge is getting people. This is just adding salt to the wound."

Before the recent infections, Boston Centerless, where about 85% of workers are vaccinated, had gone about 10 months with just a couple of Covid cases, and it had none in 2020, Mr. Tamasi said.

Rubber-seal maker Precision Associates Inc. recently reintroduced mask requirements for the 215 workers at its Minneapolis factory. Bradley Kadue, president, said a spate of recent Covid-19 cases among employees, including five in the week after from Christmas, is close to the company's prior peak in the early months of the pandemic.

Precision Associates has been closely tracking where employees appear to have caught the virus and believes they are getting it off hours, Mr. Kadue said. That includes four employees with Covid-19 who had attended a funeral together.

Mr. Kadue said recent changes to federal government quarantine guidance have helped keep workers on production lines. Late last month, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention updated its voluntary recommendations that people isolate themselves for five days if they no longer show symptoms after being infected with Covid-19 and then wear a mask for the next five days, down from 10 days of isolation previously.

"The new CDC guidance of 5 days helps," Mr. Kadue said. "The reality is that we can't have sick people in the workplace."

In Buena Vista, Va., a plant owned by Racine, Wis.-based Modine Manufacturing Co. has been struggling to produce enough doorway space heaters during the busy winter season. It was already short-staffed, and increasing Covid-19 infections among workers have made production even more difficult, said Brian Agen, head of human resources.

About 550 miles to the southwest, Modine had spare workers. The company's Lawrenceburg, Tenn., plant, which makes cooling parts for cars, had reduced output after its automotive customers slowed production because of a shortage of semiconductors. After Thanksgiving, the company bussed nearly 30 volunteer workers more than eight hours to work in the Virginia facility, putting them up in hotels.

"You have to be pretty creative in these times," said Neil Brinker, Modine's CEO, who also asked corporate employees to volunteer on the Buena Vista assembly line.

At Rich Specialty Trailers in Topeka, Ind., owner Sheldon Rheinheimer said finding truck drivers has become more difficult in recent weeks, as he monitors rising coronavirus cases in the state. He said he has started sending his own employees on additional trips to pick up supplies themselves.

Mr. Rheinheimer said Rich pays for its employees to get rapid Covid tests at a local drugstore if they are exposed or suspect they are sick, a policy he said has helped keep more of his staff on the job.

Staffing shortages deepened last week for Church Metal Spinning Co., a Milwaukee-based manufacturer of steel parts for large engines and industrial equipment. Eight of the business's 36 employees are out with Covid, said company president Mark Verhein, the most it has ever had out sick at one time.

Church's employees already were working overtime to catch up with orders that were behind schedule because of supply shortages and a strong order flow. Turnover among newer employees has been high,

Mr. Verhein said, and the company has hired some part-time workers who are high school and college students pursuing technical careers.

“I’m not missing every due date, but I’m missing a couple,” Mr. Verhein said. “I’m a little fearful about the next four weeks.”

On the factory floor of Generac Holdings Inc., absences currently are running at the highest rate since late 2020, according to CEO Aaron Jagdfeld. As many as 600 employees are sidelined with illness or quarantining, he estimated, representing about 10% of the Waukesha, Wis.-based generator manufacturer’s 6,000 production workers world-wide.

With generator sales booming because of weather-related power outages and many at-home workers, Generac has been building a buffer of employees, Mr. Jagdfeld said. It is overstaffing plants on the assumption that some new hires will leave quickly or that another Covid-19 outbreak will hit the production workforce.

Generac created flexible work schedules in 2020 to accommodate parents with small children kept home from school, as well as college students and others unable to work a rigid shift schedule. Those flexible schedules will likely become permanent features for the company, Mr. Jagdfeld said.

To attract workers, Generac raised starting hourly wages by nearly 30% in 2021 to above \$17, after having increased pay by more than 20% in 2020. The company has tried to raise its profile among potential employees, sponsoring a music stage at a popular summertime festival in Milwaukee.

The Supreme Court is currently considering challenges to the Biden administration’s Covid-19 vaccine-or-testing plan for large employers. Mr. Jagdfeld said the pending rules could hinder the company’s recruitment efforts. The weekly testing requirement for unvaccinated workers, he said, could lead some to leave larger companies for smaller firms that are exempt.

“The hope was that 2022 would get better, but it’s starting off in a mess,” Mr. Jagdfeld said.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Rapid tests reliable detecting omicron?
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-reliable-are-covid-19-rapid-tests-for-detecting-omicron-11641747601?mod=hp_trending_now_article_pos2
GIST	<p>The fast-spreading Omicron variant has made us increasingly reliant on at-home rapid antigen tests to tell us whether we have Covid-19. Yet recent studies raise questions about the tests’ effectiveness at detecting Omicron.</p> <p>The good news: Rapid antigen tests can definitely detect Omicron. The bad news: Some research indicates that rapid tests may be less sensitive to Omicron than they are to other variants.</p> <p>That means the tests might be yielding more false negatives, especially in the early days of infection. And preliminary data from one small study suggests that people could be contagious before they get a positive result on a rapid test.</p> <p>You might not be able to trust a negative rapid-test result in the early days of an infection. It might be necessary to test repeatedly over a few days to get an accurate result. If you are testing before an indoor gathering, you are still taking a risk.</p> <p>Abbott Laboratories, which makes the popular BinaxNow at-home rapid test, said extensive testing has shown that “BinaxNow continues to detect the Omicron variant at comparable viral load levels as all other variants and the original SARS-CoV-2 strain.” The company also pointed to a recent preprint study from Brigham and Women’s Hospital and Harvard that showed strong performance of BinaxNow with Omicron.</p>

[Quidel](#) Corp. , maker of the QuickVue test, said it has conducted tests using live Omicron virus from South African samples that confirmed the test can detect the variant.

A negative result from a rapid antigen test might not be reliable, especially in the first days after exposure, but a positive result almost always indicates an infection, experts say.

So how should you make sense of conflicting information—and what should you do about it?

What the research says

Preliminary data is mixed. Research has looked at different tests in different countries, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions.

One [recent preprint](#), which hasn't been peer-reviewed, examined the performance of antigen tests with virus samples cultured from Omicron-infected people and from those with other variants. The study found the tests were less sensitive at detecting Omicron. In [a separate study](#) in the Journal of Clinical Microbiology, Australian researchers found 10 antigen tests performed as well with Omicron as with Delta.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration said in late December that “early data suggests that antigen tests do detect the Omicron variant but may have reduced sensitivity.” [The statement](#) was based on unpublished laboratory data from research at Emory University supported by the National Institutes of Health.

The study compared rapid-test performance on live virus samples containing the Omicron variant, against samples containing the Delta variant. Researchers found that when they diluted samples of Omicron and Delta, the rapid tests were better able to detect virus in the Delta samples, says Bruce Tromberg, director of the NIH's National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering, which is funding the Emory study.

If you've been feeling ill but getting repeated negative rapid-test results, a separate recent small study conducted in a real-world setting during the Omicron surge may help explain why. It found that rapid tests took a median of three days to detect an infection after a PCR test identified a positive case.

The study included data from 30 people taking daily saliva-based PCR tests and rapid nasal antigen tests in December at five workplaces in New York and San Francisco. All the workers were vaccinated; most were boosted.

The rapid tests produced false negatives for two days following a positive PCR test, even though most people had high-enough levels of virus to infect other people, the study found. At least four people transmitted the virus to others during the three days it took to yield a positive result on a rapid test.

With Omicron, people were very infectious before a rapid test delivered a positive result, says Blythe Adamson, lead author of the study and founder and chief executive officer of Infectious Economics, a public-health consultancy. Dr. Adamson is also an employee at Flatiron Health, an independent affiliate of Roche. Another Roche unit makes PCR tests. One of the co-authors of the paper is the CEO of a company that provided the saliva-based Covid-19 tests used in the study.

Scientists not involved with the study noted that it is possible the positive cases showed up sooner in PCR tests than in rapid tests because the PCR tests were done with saliva, while the rapid tests took nasal samples. [Preliminary data](#) from [other studies](#) have indicated that Omicron may show up earlier in saliva tests than in nasal swabs.

In general, rapid tests have a lower sensitivity than PCR tests, meaning they produce more false negatives. The FDA authorizes the tests provided they have 80% sensitivity—so they could produce a false negative 20% of the time. Most tests on the market range from 85% to 95% sensitivity.

Why rapid tests might be less sensitive with Omicron

Omicron is hitting when many people have some level of protection as a result of natural infection or vaccination. In people who are vaccinated and boosted, peak concentration of virus—when rapid tests are most likely to detect it—might not occur until three or four days after infection, says Omai Garner, director of clinical microbiology for the UCLA Health system. The delay could result in more false negatives during the first few days, he says.

Another possible explanation: Because it appears that people can spread Omicron with lower levels of virus, people might be infectious before they have high enough levels to be detected in a rapid test, scientists say.

Omicron's incubation period—the time between when you get exposed to the virus and when you become infectious—appears to be as short as 12 to 24 hours, Dr. Adamson says.

That means someone could receive a negative rapid-test result and become infectious hours later, says Gigi Gronvall, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security.

Tests might also be looking in the wrong place. Sore throats are a common first symptom of Omicron infections, and some scientists speculate that a throat swab could detect the virus earlier than a nasal swab would. The FDA advises against throat swabs, but the practice is endorsed by the U.K.

How should you use rapid tests?

Rapid antigen tests are a useful tool if we are smart about how we use them.

Because the data suggest that rapid tests may be yielding more false negatives at the beginning of an Omicron infection, you'll have a better chance of getting an accurate result if you wait a day or two after developing symptoms to test, says Katelyn Jetelina, assistant professor of epidemiology at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston. If your test is negative, take a second test a day or two later, or get a PCR test if you can. ([Easier said than done](#) these days.)

Understand the limitations of rapid tests if you're considering using them to screen people before gatherings. Rapid tests before a wedding or other large indoor gathering could miss early infections that could be contagious, Dr. Adamson says.

If you have a positive rapid test, you almost definitely have Covid-19, Dr. Gronvall says. False positives are rare, especially when case rates are as high as they are now. You likely don't need to confirm a positive rapid-test result with a follow-up PCR test, unless an employer or other institution requires it.

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HEADLINE	01/10 Japan extends entry ban for foreigners
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/japan-extends-entry-ban-for-foreigners-citing-omicron-11641874059?mod=hp_listb_pos3
GIST	<p>TOKYO—Japan said Tuesday it would extend its near-total ban on foreigners entering the country until at least the end of February, citing the risk of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>The ban took effect on Nov. 30 and has earned more than 80% support from Japanese surveyed in recent polls. Helped by the perception that he is tough on Covid-19, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's cabinet has enjoyed around 60% support.</p> <p>Under Japan's policy, which is the toughest among the Group of Seven industrialized democracies, no foreigner can be newly admitted to the country for work, study or tourism.</p>

	<p>Japanese citizens and foreigners who already had residence status in the country are permitted to return from travel abroad, but they face quarantine in government-authorized facilities for periods ranging from a few days to two weeks. Also, the number of people entering the country is capped at about 3,500 a day.</p> <p>Government spokesman Hirokazu Matsuno defended the policy on Tuesday, saying it has bought the country time to prepare for Omicron's onslaught.</p> <p>"In dealing with Omicron, we must be extra careful," Mr. Matsuno said.</p> <p>The number of new Covid-19 cases in Japan has surged in recent weeks, topping 8,000 on Sunday.</p> <p>The outbreak has been particularly severe in Okinawa, where many U.S. military bases are located. Officials have attributed that to Omicron infections brought in by U.S. service members who are allowed by a U.S.-Japan treaty to fly directly into military bases located on Japanese territory without the usual immigration checks.</p> <p>The U.S. and Japan agreed on Sunday that U.S. service members wouldn't leave their bases for the next two weeks except for essential activities.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Cases set to triple pre-omicron record
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-cases-set-to-triple-pre-omicron-record-11641816922?cx_testId=3&cx_testVariant=cx_2&cx_artPos=1&mod=WTRN#cxrecs_s
GIST	<p>The seven-day average of newly reported Covid-19 infections in the U.S. is on track to triple the pre-Omicron record set a year ago, when America saw a quarter million daily cases, as concerns grow over access to and reliability of testing both in the U.S. and Europe, where the highly transmissible Omicron variant has also taken root.</p> <p>Growing demand for tests has led some laboratories to ration access, giving priority to people exhibiting symptoms or who have other underlying health concerns. The University of North Carolina's microbiology lab, for instance, is restricting tests to those showing Covid-19 symptoms, employees and patients who need a test before undergoing surgery. The University of Washington temporarily closed some of its testing sites last week and is giving appointment priority to people with Covid-19 symptoms or a known exposure, amid growing demand, though health experts worry that asymptomatic people might continue to spread the virus if they are unable to access testing.</p> <p>Chicago Public Schools canceled classes again Monday after weekend talks failed to resolve an impasse over Covid-19 safety protocols that has kept students at the nation's third-largest school system home since last Wednesday.</p> <p>"Bargaining is at a serious stage," said Chicago Teachers Union President Jesse Sharkey Monday.</p> <p>President Biden last month outlined plans to expand Covid-19 testing sites, and distribute a half-billion free at-home test kits to slow the Omicron surge. The White House has also moved to require large employers to ensure their workforces are vaccinated or regularly test negative for Covid-19, though these measures are facing legal challenges.</p> <p>Germany, meanwhile, said it wants to draw up a list of rapid antigen tests that are particularly good at detecting early Omicron infections, after doubts arose about the sensitivity of some of these tests to the variant.</p> <p>Health Minister Karl Lauterbach said on public television Sunday night that he had asked the Paul Ehrlich Institute, the government's vaccine agency, to identify those rapid tests that can be relied on to identify Omicron infections early.</p>

How soon rapid tests can identify an Omicron infection matters for the future course of the pandemic because of initial evidence that people with the virus might be infectious earlier in the course of their infection than with previous variants, and possibly before some rapid tests are able to detect the virus.

Still, there is [growing evidence suggesting Omicron is milder](#) than other coronavirus variants and, combined with wider vaccination, this is fueling some optimism that it could prove less lethal.

The seven-day average for newly reported cases in the U.S. topped 700,000 for the first time Saturday, data from Johns Hopkins University show, as the highly infectious Omicron variant spreads throughout the country. The numbers reported by state health departments and collected by Johns Hopkins also likely reflect a fraction of the true number, due in part to Omicron's rapid spread and the difficulty many Americans have had getting tested.

At least 40 states are currently at or near record case levels, data through Saturday show. The seven-day average of newly reported U.S. deaths has reached about 1,600, Johns Hopkins data show, up from levels closer to 1,250 early last week. Some data catch-up after delays in reporting over the holidays may still be buffeting Covid-19 numbers, and public-health experts believe it will take more time to see how the rapid climb in Omicron cases will translate into deaths.

Some officials also have said they have hope that Omicron will lead to an earlier peak in cases compared with previous waves, given how quickly it is spreading. In hard-hit New York City, there are indications that the pace of new infections may be easing.

The issue of testing is dominating discussion of how to best adapt to the spread of Covid-19 in other European nations. Spain's government is moving to cap the retail price of rapid antigen tests after drugstores reported worsening shortages over the past month, leading to a rise in prices. In the U.K., authorities say they will maintain free access for quick at-home tests for now, after earlier speculation that the government would stop distributing them because of the cost.

Michael Gove, the minister for housing and communities, told Sky News on Monday that the tests would remain free for "as long as we need," without specifying how long that would be.

Mr. Gove also said that the U.K. is moving to a situation where the country can live with Covid-19, with pressure on its healthcare system and public services beginning to ease.

"But it's absolutely vital to recognize that we are not there yet," he said. "There will be some difficult weeks ahead."

The U.K. government is stepping up a campaign to encourage pregnant women to get the Covid-19 vaccine after it was found that 96% of pregnant women admitted to hospitals with Covid-19 between May and October last year were unvaccinated.

The U.K. reported a seven-day average of 177,000 new Covid-19 infections on Sunday, down from its earlier peak of 180,000 on Jan. 4.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia plans to restart in-school learning for children under the age of 12 years old after more than 18 months of closure due to the pandemic.

Elementary and kindergarten schools will reopen starting Jan. 23, the kingdom's ministry of education said Sunday. Students would be expected to wear masks and maintain social distancing as they go back to school, the ministry said.

Saudi Arabia began offering the Covid-19 vaccine to children between the ages of 5 and 11 late last year. The kingdom reported 4,778 new cases on Monday; the total number of cases since the start of the pandemic has reached 583,531, according to the health ministry.

HEADLINE	01/10 WA 2022 legislative session kicks off
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3307217/washington-legislative-session-kicks-off-2022/
GIST	<p>The 2022 legislative session convened Monday with opening ceremonies in the state House and Senate.</p> <p>“Our time together this session is short and the list of what we all hope to accomplish is long,” said House Speaker Laurie Jenkins during the House opening ceremony. “It will take all 98 of us in this chamber listening to each other, and working together, to tackle the challenges our state faces, whether it’s the economy, housing, transportation, health care, racial equity or climate change.”</p> <p>Jenkins also acknowledged the loss of longtime state Senator Doug Eriksen last month after a week’s long battle with COVID.</p> <p>Opening day also brought more announcements about lawmakers testing positive for COVID, including Democratic Senator Mark Mullet.</p> <p>“Sen. Mark Mullet (D-Issaquah), chair of the Senate Business, Financial Services & Trade Committee, will work the initial days of the 2022 legislative session from home after testing positive for COVID-19,” a statement from Mullet’s office reads.</p> <p>“After my wife got COVID last Tuesday, I’ve gotten tested to make sure it’s been safe for me to take care of our kids,” Mullet said. “As recently as Saturday night I tested negative, but after my positive test in Olympia this morning I just got in my car and headed back home to prepare for a week of remote work.”</p> <p>Mullet, who has received a two-shot vaccination and a booster shot, said he was not suffering any symptoms and that his primary concern was to not expose anyone else to the virus.</p> <p>“I think the immunizations really protect us from the brunt of the virus, which is key to keeping our hospital system from being overwhelmed,” he said. “If not for the immunizations, things could be a lot worse.”</p> <p>Senator Yasmin Trudeau of Tacoma also announced she had a breakthrough case.</p> <p>Those announcements came on the heels of two other Democratic senators — Senate Majority Leader Andy Billig and Sen. John Lovick — reporting they had tested positive as well.</p> <p>Lovick said he was dealing with only mild symptoms. Billig reported virtually no symptoms. Both had been fully vaccinated and boosted.</p> <p>Most lawmakers are handling the start of the session remotely as omicron cases surge in Washington. As far as priorities for the session, multiple bills in both chambers are aimed at fixing legislation passed in prior years.</p> <p>Tuesday morning will see the House Public Safety Committee take up several bills aimed at making fixes to police reform bills passed last session, that have caused some police departments to stop responding to certain calls.</p> <p>HB 1719 would make changes to a bill that barred police from using most military style equipment, that unintentionally appears to ban the use of .50 caliber bean bag and other non-lethal rounds.</p> <p>HB 1735 would make fixes to last session’s use of force bill that had caused departments to stop responding to mental health calls because of concerns over changes to use of physical force standards, which is sometimes necessary when dealing with involuntary treatment patients.</p> <p>HB 1726 also addresses use of force by officers.</p>

	<p>During a preview of the legislative session last week, Democratic and Republican leaders also expressed desire to look at legislative oversight in emergency situations such as COVID, fix or repeal a controversial long-term care tax, do more on the affordable housing and homeless front, and much more.</p> <p>Several returning bills are also likely to get attention this session, including bans on so-called high capacity magazines and assault weapons, tougher penalties on repeat DUI offenders, and the state insurance commissioner's quest to ban insurance companies from using credit checks to determine a person's premium.</p> <p>On the lighter side, there is a bill to make pickleball the state sport, as well as yet another effort to create a Patches Pals specialty license plate.</p> <p>On the climate front there are some big pieces of legislation, including tough restrictions on packaging, and a ban on the use of toxic chemicals in beauty products.</p> <p>It remains to be seen how far those will go in such a short session that also includes a big supplemental budget.</p> <p>As for the tone of the session: "I have a feeling that the theme of this session is going to be seeking balance. And so I think that's what we'll be trying to do," said Jenkins during Friday's Seattle City Club legislative preview session.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Seattle PD 'astonishing' loss of officers
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3306940/rantz-seattle-police-shed-170-officers-2021-more/
GIST	<p>The Seattle Police Department confirmed it lost an astonishing 170 officers in 2021, but that only tells part of the story. Dozens more will be separated from the department in the coming weeks, a result of the former mayor's vaccine mandate.</p> <p>The final separations report, which includes retirements and resignations, comes after a year of anti-police activism and a vaccine mandate that sidelined upwards of 100 officers. Some of those sidelined officers who were going through the accommodation repeal process ended up quitting or complying with the mandate. Others are still on the list as they await their inevitable firing — unless the newly sworn-in mayor Bruce Harrell changes direction.</p> <p>Interim police chief Adrian Diaz says the department is at "crisis levels." The union president says it's "off the charts dangerous" for the city.</p> <p>Seattle does not have enough officers An SPD spokesperson says the number of deployable officers is just "around 950" as the city and region experiences a surge of violent crime. But it is actually much worse.</p> <p>As of January 10, while there are 948 officers on the force, the number includes recruits not yet sworn (36), students in field training (25), and unavailable officers (between 123 and 187).</p> <p>The number of deployable sworn Seattle Police Officers Guild (SPOG) members is 880. City officials have previously said the SPD should be at 1,500-1,600, minimum.</p> <p>"The current state of Seattle Police staffing is off the charts dangerous for our community," Seattle Police Officers Guild president Mike Solan warns the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH.</p> <p>Making matters worse, there are up to 187 officers on the so-called "HR Unavailable" list. These officers are on extended leave for a variety of reasons, including injury or military service. But it also lists officers who are using their paid time off — accrued over years of service — before leaving the department. Due to the nature of when these numbers are reported and how often they can change, it will sometimes conflict with numbers reported from SPOG.</p>

Historically low numbers

With 180 separations in the previous year, the SPD lost a historic 350 officers since 2020, the bulk coming after the anti-police activism following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

In late October, I reported the [total number was at least 335 separations](#), indicating an acceleration of retirements or resignations in the final months of the year. For context, the SPD saw 95 separations in 2019.

It's unclear how many officers who are not in compliance with the vaccine mandate are still to be terminated. SPOG is negotiating the accommodation appeals process with the city. Under then-mayor Jenny Durkan, the city was dragging its feet on negotiations.

Vaccine mandate making matters much worse

The SPD has [struggled to staff daily shifts across all precincts and all watches](#).

The department has moved towards staff augmentation, relying on non-patrol officers to volunteer for patrol shifts just to meet staffing minimums. There are some shifts where precincts do not meet the minimum number of officers required to keep their community and each other safe.

"I'm fearful that officers who continue to augment patrol shifts will soon burn out. This can't continue. SPOG is trying to work with the city to solve our community's police staffing crisis," Solan said to the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH.

And while the city does little, so far, to change the situation, other departments are recruiting Seattle officers.

"Currently I don't see a robust plan in place to attract other people to become Seattle officers nor plans to retain our current ones," Solan said. "What I do see are other jurisdictions rolling out the red carpet with high signing bonuses to entice their future police officers. We all know why this crisis started and it was completely avoidable."

New mayor continues the mandate

Then-candidate Harrell indicated his support for the mandates. His office, through a spokesperson, confirms they won't rescind the mandate. They do, however, acknowledge the staffing crisis is serious.

"The mayor has been very clear that he believes SPD needs additional officers to meet national best practices, reduce response times, and ensure thorough and comprehensive investigations. He's committed to working not only to retain current SPD officers, but also to recruit the next generation," a spokesperson for the mayor said in an email to the Jason Rantz Show on KTTH.

The spokesperson says Harrell is confident "there's an opportunity to set a new tone for the City on police and public safety needs to help meet those goals."

Solan indicates there's not much time left to tackle this issue. The rise in crime and current staffing numbers appear to back up his assertion.

"Seattle can't wait anymore. At the end of the day, it is our entire community that is suffering as there are hardly enough cops to answer their calls for help. Seattle is in serious trouble and is worth saving," Solan says.

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HEADLINE	01/10 King Co. Metro faces workforce challenges
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3307111/king-county-metro-suspends-routes-temporary-workforce-challenge/
GIST	King County Metro has announced the suspension of six bus routes through Jan. 21.

	<p>The agency cites a confluence of problems contributing to the cancellations, including recovery from recent snowstorms and a recent uptick in sick calls.</p> <p>Routes 162, 177, 304, 320, and 330 will not run on weekdays, and route 125 will not run on Saturdays. They otherwise plan to operate their full network outside of those few cancellations.</p> <p>Metro spokesperson Sean Hawks told MyNorthwest that the agency has recently hired and onboarded 37 new part-time drivers. A subsequent class of 10 new drivers started on Monday, Jan. 10.</p> <p>“We face a temporary workforce challenge,” Hawks said. “We have more cancellations through Jan. 21 than usual. That’s why we’re taking this proactive effort to give tools to customers to plan their travel.”</p> <p>“Whether you are taking an earlier or later bus than usual, or are making an alternative travel plan, we apologize for the inconvenience and greatly appreciate your patience as our fleet is repaired and our workforce stabilizes,” an online announcement of the cancellations reads.</p> <p>King County Metro recommends the Puget Sound Trip Planner for up to date announcements on route cancellations. Updates can also be found through their Service Advisory page, or by texting a bus stop number to 62550 to receive information on bus trips headed that way or cancellation notices.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Puget Sound schools strain; omicron surge
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3306879/puget-sound-schools-omicron-return-remote-learning/
GIST	<p>Puget Sound schools are already beginning to struggle with Washington’s recent uptick in COVID-19 cases, with two canceling all classes on Monday, and another shifting to remote learning.</p> <p>Both Kimball Elementary and Franklin High School in Seattle canceled classes on Monday, citing issues with student absences and staffing shortages, noting that “based on current staff and student attendance data, the normal flow of our students’ day will be drastically impacted.”</p> <p>While classes are expected to resume at both schools on Tuesday, officials are still “working to determine” what form that will take — be it a return to in-person operations, moving back to virtual learning, or taking a hybrid approach moving forward.</p> <p>“This decision will be based on a review of staff attendance data,” Seattle Public Schools said in a news release.</p> <p>SPS offered COVID testing clinics for all students and staff prior to the resumption of classes last week, identifying 588 positive COVID-19 cases, comprising roughly 4% of those who were tested. Up-to-date data since then is not currently available on the district’s COVID dashboard.</p> <p>One other local school has already opted to roll back to remote classes, with Kirkland’s Lake Washington High School announcing the temporary shift on Sunday night.</p> <p>The Lake Washington School District said the decision was made due to the district’s inability to safely operate the school, resulting from “so many staff being absent and the number of unfilled sub positions.”</p> <p>The district said it attempted to fill uncovered administrative, classroom, and supervisory positions over the past week but said there are more absences than it is able to cover.</p> <p>“As I have said, our goal has been to keep our schools open for in-person learning with the knowledge that we may need to close a school. I greatly appreciate your understanding as we navigate the current situation,” Superintendent Dr. Jan Holmen said.</p>

	Meanwhile, several Washington colleges and universities started their winter terms remotely this month. That includes the University of Washington, Seattle University, Bellevue College, Seattle Pacific University, Washington State University, and Western Washington University.
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HEADLINE	01/10 Russia troops Kazakhstan to stay, finish job
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/10/world/europe/putin-russia-kazakhstan.html
GIST	<p>MOSCOW — President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia said on Monday that recent unrest in Kazakhstan had been caused by “destructive internal and external forces” and that more than 2,000 troops his country had sent as “peacekeepers” would leave only once their mission was complete.</p> <p>Mr. Putin said the troops would remain “for a limited time period.” But he did not give any deadline for a withdrawal, saying that they would stay as long as President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan “considers it necessary,” raising the possibility they could be in the country indefinitely.</p> <p>Mr. Putin’s comments, made at a meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a body equivalent to NATO that includes six countries from the former Soviet Union, were his first since unrest engulfed Kazakhstan last week, with widespread protests over rising gas prices that began peacefully and then turned violent.</p> <p>The Russian president said the unrest was indicative of foreign attempts to intervene in a region the Kremlin sees as its sphere of influence, and compared recent events to the protests in Ukraine that led to the ouster of the country’s pro-Russian president in 2014. Those protests also helped precipitate Russia’s annexation of Crimea and invasion of the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine that year.</p> <p>Mr. Putin said that the Collective Security Treaty Organization, widely seen as Russian-dominated, would not allow any “color revolutions,” a term that has been used for the pro-democracy movements that swept many countries of the former Soviet Union.</p> <p>“Elements of force and information support of protests” reminiscent of the Ukraine protests, which the Kremlin has long maintained were organized by anti-Russian foreign powers, “were actively used, and well-organized and well-controlled groups of militants were also used,” Mr. Putin said. He added that people “apparently trained in terrorist camps abroad” had been among the rioters.</p> <p>At least 5,800 people have been detained and more than 2,000 injured after several days of violence last week in Kazakhstan, according to the president’s office. The country’s health ministry issued, then withdrew, a statement on Sunday saying that at least 164 people had died in the violence, including 103 in the country’s economic center, Almaty.</p> <p>More than a dozen police officers, national guardsmen, and military personnel had been killed, according to the interior ministry, which put the number of injured at 1,300.</p> <p>Mr. Tokayev, the country’s president, told the same alliance meeting that he had weathered “an attempted coup d’état,” one in which “armed militants” had sought to use protests as a pretext.</p> <p>“The main goal was obvious: the undermining of the constitutional order, the destruction of government institutions and the seizure of power,” he said.</p> <p>It is difficult to assess the situation inside Kazakhstan, which has been largely shut off from the outside world, and neither Mr. Putin nor Mr. Tokayev provided evidence for their assertions.</p> <p>The rapid evolution of peaceful protests in the Kazakhstan’s west to countrywide demonstrations that quickly descended into violent chaos has led observers to speculate that the unrest was fanned by infighting within the Kazakh elite.</p>

That view was fanned this weekend when officials announced that the former head of Kazakhstan's powerful intelligence agency and a key ally of a former president had been arrested on suspicion of treason.

The comments from Mr. Putin came as [American and Russian diplomats gathered in Geneva](#) in the hopes of negotiating a drawdown of the 100,000 troops the Kremlin has [positioned on the border with Ukraine](#) in recent months.

Mr. Putin said Russia's decision to send troops to the "brotherly Kazakh people" — the first time the 20-year-old Collective Security Treaty Organization had activated its mutual defense clause — was "extremely timely and absolutely legitimate."

Mr. Tokayev's decision to invite foreign troops to help quell the unrest was a sign of his domestic weakness and [internal power struggles](#), many analysts said. It is likely to pull the resource-rich Central Asian nation further into Russia's embrace, and make Mr. Tokayev [reliant on Moscow](#) for his continued power.

In a sign, perhaps, of the power imbalance between them, Mr. Putin forgot Mr. Tokayev's name during the video meeting Monday, mangling it as "Kemal Zhomartovich," instead of Kassym-Jomart. In a news conference on Dec. 23, Mr. Putin did not mention the Kazakh president by name but noted decades of positive cooperation with his predecessor, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who stepped down in 2019 after 28 years in power.

Kazakh officials said on Sunday that order had been restored and that the foreign troops would "probably" be gone by the following week.

But Russia has a record of sending "peacekeepers" who do not leave. Troops it sent three decades ago to the breakaway region of Moldova and the Abkhazia region of Georgia remain there.

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HEADLINE	01/10 Fears of growing extremism in the military
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/10/us-military-rightwing-extremism-american-democracy
GIST	<p>Fears are growing among experts, politicians, and former generals about the rise of rightwing extremism in the US military and the potential threat it could pose to American democracy.</p> <p>Even as the US Department of Defense issues new policies to root out extremism in its ranks, some experts caution that the safeguards don't go far enough, leaving the next election vulnerable to attack as well as fears about a broader violent "insurgency" by rightwing radicals.</p> <p>"We're behind the ball on what we know about domestic terrorists in the United States," Paul Eaton, a retired US army major general and senior adviser to the non-profit VoteVets, said.</p> <p>Eaton and two other retired army generals recently wrote an op-ed in the Washington Post last month warning of the threat of a coup in the 2024 election. The generals warned that it could succeed with the aid of rogue military elements. They contemplated the possibility of a breakdown of the chain of command, along partisan lines, in the aftermath of a contested election with "rogue units organizing among themselves to support the 'rightful' commander in chief".</p> <p>Eaton said in an interview that the American military and law enforcement have a history of underestimating the threat from the far right.</p> <p>"It's the Timothy McVeigh problem: what did we know about McVeigh and what were we doing about it?" said Eaton.</p> <p>The 1995 Oklahoma City bombing killed 168 people and injured over 650 when one morning ex-army soldiers Timothy McVeigh and co-conspirator Terry Nichols parked a rental truck filled with homemade</p>

explosives outside a federal building and detonated it. It remains the deadliest act of domestic terrorism in US history. The two men harbored anti-government and racist beliefs.

“The McVeighs of the world are still there, we had about 4,500 of them crawling all over the nation’s Capitol [during the 6 January attack],” said Eaton, who added that the increased power of the internet and rise of social media had boosted the threat massively since McVeigh’s attack.

“The infection of extremism into our state and local police and our armed forces is a very serious concern that needs to be monitored,” said Eaton.

Eaton added: “There’s a recruiting effort going on locally, they’re going to school boards, like missionaries sent to the islands to convert people. The Proud Boys and Oath Keepers are definitely recruiting.”

In many ways the aftermath of the attack on the Capitol in Washington DC laid bare the vulnerability of US service members to extremism. The [727](#) defendants charged in the 6 January Capitol riot include [81](#) with ties to the military, while five were active-duty service members. A 35-year-old woman, air force veteran Ashli Babbitt, was fatally shot while attempting to break the doors into the House chamber.

The appeal of extremism among active duty and veterans is a longstanding issue with a track record of violent incidents.

Last year army [private Ethan Phelan Melzer confessed to prosecutors](#) in the southern district of New York to plotting an attack on fellow soldiers in his unit. The federal indictment states that Melzer confessed to sharing sensitive information about his soon-to-deploy unit with members of a neo-Nazi group in order to facilitate an attack that would “result in the deaths of as many of his fellow service members as possible”.

In 2018 marine lance corporal Vasillios Pistolis was imprisoned after assaulting people at the 2017 Charlottesville “Unite The Right” rally. Pistolis was discovered to belong the neo-Nazi group Atomwaffen after bragging about violence in [chats with other Atomwaffen members](#), which were eventually leaked.

From 1990 to July 2021 there have been at least 354 people with military backgrounds that have committed criminal acts motivated by “political, economic, social, or religious goals” according to data collected by [the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland](#).

The data suggest the problem is growing in the US as from 1990-2010 there was an average of six cases a year, but over the last decade “that number has more than tripled to nearly 21 subjects per year”.

The generals’ public call for elections safeguards in the military comes as the Pentagon issued new guidelines aimed at rooting out extremism in its ranks. The defense chief, Lloyd Austin, ordered a 60-day “stand down” early last year to come up with rules to stomp out extremism among the military’s various branches. The new rules adopted by the Pentagon last month specify that service members are prohibited from engaging in extremist activities and could face disciplinary action for even “liking” extremist content on social media.

The new guidance specifies that commanders must not be “indifferent” and hold service members who participate in extremist activity accountable. The Pentagon defines extremism as advocacy for violence to achieve goals that are “political, religious, discriminatory, or ideological in nature”. It includes efforts to overthrow the government and advocating widespread unlawful discrimination “based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex (including pregnancy), gender identity, or sexual orientation”.

But the Pentagon’s effort towards stomping out extremism in the military may not go far enough.

An [Associated Press investigation](#) found the new guidelines fail to account for racism among the ranks, membership in groups such as the KKK, and longstanding racial disparities in military justice.

The new guidelines don't prohibit membership in extremist groups like the KKK as long as they are not "actively participating". The new rules attempt to police acts rather than associations or beliefs. Some former military figures say it's absurd to allow service members to also be members of violent extremist groups.

"Seriously? You want to be in a foxhole with a guy who's a member of the KKK? Is that really what we want to do here?" said Eaton. "The idea of service members having to be in close proximity to card-carrying members of the Proud Boys, as long as they don't 'march', that just doesn't get it." he added.

Some experts also criticize the approach as ignoring the very real threat of white supremacists. "It reflects the institutional bias that permeates all of our government, that even calling out white supremacy is politically fraught," said Mike German, a former FBI special agent and current fellow at the Brennan Center for Justice.

German is concerned the classification has the potential for unintended consequences. "It opens the door to a strange political 'both sides-ism'," he said. "The consequence is that somebody expressing anti-racism can be seen as an extremist under that description."

Experts see the far right and other extremists as actively trying to recruit members of the military, including foreign agents seeking to promote disruption within the US.

"We're in the early stages of an insurgency in the United States," said Kristofer Goldsmith, an Iraq war veteran and researcher.

In a 200-page report published by Vietnam Veterans of America, Goldsmith found that between 2017 and 2019 foreign entities, such as Russian hackers, "coordinated online targeting of American service members, veterans, and their families" in an effort to disrupt American democracy.

"We found 10 different ways foreign entities were targeting veterans online," said Goldsmith, including through ads, fake veteran accounts that sent friend request to other veterans in order to penetrate the "relatively small community of veteran advocates, and found large social media pages run by foreign admins that spread disinformation tailored to veterans in a effort to influence the election".

Goldsmith sees anti-democratic, white supremacist and fascist movements targeting veterans for the same reason as foreign adversaries. "Veterans are an economically efficient target for campaigns, because if you get one, they often bring their immediate social circle with them," said Goldsmith.

Goldsmith warns that the coming election is vulnerable to a rising insurgency. "We saw a violent insurrection, we did not experience a peaceful transfer of power. It was an attempted coup. Every failed coup is just practice for the next one," said Goldsmith.

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HEADLINE	01/10 San Francisco 911 for dire emergency only
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/10/san-francisco-coronavirus-omicron-emergency-california
GIST	<p>Officials in San Francisco are asking residents not to call 911 except in dire emergencies to avoid further straining emergency resources, as coronavirus cases deplete the ranks of health workers, ambulance crews, firefighters and other essential workers.</p> <p>The Omicron variant, which appears more likely to cause breakthrough cases even among vaccinated people, has begun to thin the ranks of those most needed to fight this latest wave of infections. San Francisco mayor London Breed said on Friday that about 400 city employees, including emergency responders, had either tested positive for Covid-19 or were isolated at home due to exposure.</p>

“Only call 911 or go to the emergency [department] for life-threatening medical emergencies,” the [San Francisco Department of Emergency Management tweeted](#) this weekend. “Keep medics available for life-threatening situations.”

While the new variant appears to cause less severe illness, especially among the vaccinated, its highly contagious nature has meant that more and more essential workers are contracting the disease, leaving California’s health and emergency systems critically strained.

California has recorded nearly 6m coronavirus cases since the beginning of the pandemic according to state tallies, including more than 300,000 new cases this weekend. The daily coronavirus case rate has been higher during this Omicron-fueled surge than ever before – with about 145 out of every 100,000 residents testing positive. Meanwhile, [Los Angeles](#) county – which has cumulatively recorded the most coronavirus cases in the US throughout the pandemic, last week marked its highest single-day total for new cases.

On Friday, the state’s governor, Gavin Newsom, deployed members of the National Guard to help administer tests at overwhelmed and understaffed testing sites and said the state will send out more National Guard members this week, amid reports that residents are waiting in long lines for hours to receive Covid tests. The deployment would allow strained centers to conduct more tests daily, and help backfill staff absences.

Meanwhile, the state public health department is weighing whether to pause elective surgeries across the state, as individual hospitals are already considering which procedures to delay as Covid-19 reverberates through ranks of doctors, nurses and other hospital staff. This weekend, the health department issued controversial guidelines instructing workers at hospitals and skilled nursing facilities who tested positive for Covid-19 but were experiencing no symptoms to immediately return to work.

The guidelines, which will remain in effect until 1 February, are necessary “due to the critical staffing shortages currently being experienced across the health care continuum because of the rise in the Omicron variant”, the health department explained in a statement. The new policy comes amid record resignations and burnout among health workers two years into the pandemic.

“No patient wants to be cared for by someone who has Covid-19 or was just exposed to it,” said Gabe Montoya, an emergency room technician at Kaiser Medical Center in Downey, representing the SEIU-United Healthcare Workers. “Hospital workers cannot take much more,” said Gisela Thomas, a respiratory therapist in Palm Springs, in a statement issued by the union.

On Saturday, Newsom announced a new emergency funding package, that includes \$614m to help hospitals hire more staff, \$200m to boost emergency response and state public health capacity and \$1.2b to bolster testing.

Although the state is now registering high numbers of positive cases, there are indications that a smaller proportion of these cases are severe – especially among those who are vaccinated. A smaller proportion of coronavirus patients now need hospitalization, and fewer are being admitted to the ICU than was the case last year, health officials have noted.

Still, unvaccinated coronavirus patients have continued to fill hospitals that are once again losing the capacity to accommodate them. “Every resident can also do their part to protect our health care personnel and hospitals” by getting vaccinated, said Los Angeles public health director Barbara Ferrer. “Vaccinated individuals are between 10 and 30 times less likely to need hospital care than those unvaccinated.”

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HEADLINE	01/10 Los Angeles schools in Covid chaos
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/10/us-schools-covid-omicron-los-angeles-unified

For students across the US, the return from winter break has been marked by chaos and confusion as the [Omicron variant](#) has exacerbated staff shortages and sparked fierce debates about how to reopen classrooms safely.

In Chicago, classes resumed and then were canceled abruptly last week as the teachers' union and school district failed to agree on safety protocols, while teachers in San Francisco and other Bay Area schools staged a "sickout" to demand more N95 face masks, testing and paid sick leave for those who contract the coronavirus.

For [Los Angeles](#) Unified – the second largest public school system in the US – classes are scheduled to resume on Tuesday, and educators, students, and parents alike are bracing for another winter of anxious uncertainty.

Schools here are grappling with coronavirus conundrums that institutions across the country are facing – but on a huge scale. Vaccination rates continue to lag among children, and tests are in short supply. And all this comes as rates of Covid surge in the surrounding community, with about one in every five coronavirus tests in Los Angeles coming back positive.

In a district where many students come from low-income families and more than 80% of students qualify for a free lunch under federal guidelines, "there are no real easy answers right now" on how to balance children's educational needs and health, said Tyrone Howard, a professor of education at the University of [California](#), Los Angeles.

With coronavirus transmission rates in LA exceeding levels seen during the winter of 2020-21, Los Angeles Unified announced last week that all students and staff returning to campus this week must show a negative Covid-19 test. New rules from LA county also require employees at public and private schools to wear medical-grade masks on campus, including outdoors in crowded spaces. Administrators and health officials expect that the Omicron variant is likely to send exposed children and teachers back home and into quarantine.

But after becoming one of the first large districts in the US to [adopt a strict vaccine mandate](#) for students 12 and older for this coming semester, school officials decided to delay enforcement until next fall – largely because tens of thousands of students remain unvaccinated.

Marisol Rosales, a mother of four school-aged children in Los Angeles, said she has had trouble keeping up with the shifting rules and requirements for each of her kids' campuses. "I've been calling all day to find out more about the guidelines, and where I need to get my kids tested, and by which day," she said. She and her husband are also mentally preparing to take time off work or find last-minute childcare if schools shut down again, which will mean navigating the logistics of finding space for their four kids to attend online classes from their tight, one-bedroom home. "There's just a lot to worry about right now," she said.

While Los Angeles Unified is reopening this week, other school systems in the LA area opened during the first week of January, many with teachers and staff missing. The Santa Ana Unified school district in southern California was missing about 10% of its teachers, with 324 employees either sick or in quarantine. Another local district, in San Gabriel, closed a middle school and a high school following outbreaks but opted to keep other campuses open.

LA Unified is bracing for similar issues, while also seeking to fill 600 teacher vacancies after the district saw a spate of resignations and retirements during the pandemic. "Teaching is already a stressful job. Doing so when I'm fearing for my life and for students' lives and the lives of their families is just on a different level," said Joanne Yi, an ethnic studies and geography teacher at Augustus Hawkins in South Los Angeles.

Yi said she was dreading returning to class and fretting about whether she might contract a breakthrough infection, despite being vaccinated, or worse – pass on the infection to a student. Her classes largely

consist of low-income students of color, many of whom are recent immigrants, and many of whom are undocumented. Their parents often work in healthcare, food service or other industries – where they may face high risks of contracting Covid-19. And many students live in multigenerational homes with parents and grandparents and may lack access to affordable healthcare.

“The classroom can easily become ground zero for a mass infection in the community,” Yi said. She and other local teachers said they would feel safer if the state or local government developed benchmarks or guidelines to indicate when schools should close – similar to the color-coded system that California instituted last year. “Right now we’re consistent in our lack of consistency,” she said.

The inconsistency can wear on students, as well. “I think the number one emotion I feel is just frustrated,” said Favour Akingbemi, 17, a senior at Washington Preparatory high school in South LA. Facing yet another semester of unpredictability and the prospect of trying to focus on online classes alongside three of her siblings at home, Akingbemi said she felt burned out.

Nearly three of Akingbemi’s four high school years have been defined by the pandemic. Over the past year, she has had to convince her own parents, as well as a number of classmates, to get vaccinated, refuting the misinformation they are bombarded with on WhatsApp and social media. “It’s upsetting that we’re still stuck in this pandemic,” she said.

While about 86% of LA Unified students 12 and older have been vaccinated, vaccine rates are lagging among students five to 11 years old, who became eligible for Covid-19 vaccines in the fall. Across Los Angeles county, only 15.7% of children aged five to 11 are fully vaccinated.

For Rosales, concerns that Covid-19 vaccines will cause long-term side-effects in her kids have outweighed worries that they could contract coronavirus at school. Both Rosales and her husband are fully vaccinated and boosted, “but I don’t think the vaccines should be mandated for little kids”, she said. “I worry about the repercussions of the vaccines on their developing bodies.”

No serious safety concerns or lasting side-effects from Covid-19 vaccines were found in clinical trials among children, and public health officials and pediatricians have been assuring parents that the approved coronavirus vaccines – much like other vaccines required for children – are safe. “I tell parents, though, it’s OK to be overwhelmed, it’s OK to have fears,” said Ilan Shapiro, the medical director of health education and wellness at AltaMed in LA, who has been conducting bilingual outreach efforts to promote the vaccine. “I try to explain to parents how I decided to get my own young kids vaccinated.”

Debates over mandating vaccines for LA Unified centered on whether it would be feasible for schools to send up to 30,000 unvaccinated students aged 12 and over back to distance learning. Officials in Portland, New York and Chicago also paused discussions of mandates this winter. With vaccination rates among Black and Latino residents lagging, a strict mandate threatens to push already vulnerable students of color into a “separate and unequal” remote schooling system, said Howard.

But public health experts say that boosting vaccine rates among children is the only surefire way to protect children and keep schools open as more infectious variants arise. That is especially true for Black and Latino students in Los Angeles, whose families have been disproportionately affected by Covid-19, said Yvonne Maldonado, a pediatric infectious disease expert at Stanford. The county revealed last fall that unvaccinated Black and Latino residents had the highest Covid-19 rates during the last wave of infections, driven by the Delta variant.

Although children are less likely than adults to fall seriously ill from Covid-19, amid this surge of cases, [Covid-19 hospitalization rates](#) among children are rising. Across the US, an average of [824](#) children are hospitalized each day with Covid-19.

“If we really want to protect these kids, we have to get them vaccinated,” Maldonado said.

	State and local governments need to do more to reach out to parents, she added, and provide more information, in more languages, about the safety of the available Covid-19 vaccines. “Everybody’s burned out and tired and overwhelmed,” she said. “But I think we need to do this on behalf of kids.”
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HEADLINE	01/10 India mask wearing down despite cases rise
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/10/world/omicron-covid-testing-vaccines#india-masks-omicron
GIST	<p>Health officials in India have reported an increasing number of people refusing to wear masks, despite rising case numbers fueled by the Omicron variant, with rule breakers’ excuses including seeing masks as a sign of weakness or as simply unhelpful in preventing infection.</p> <p>“When you hear people offer explanations like that, you want to bang your head against a wall,” said Manish Chakraborty, a health official in the state of West Bengal who is part of a team of officers who impose fines on people for skirting Covid rules.</p> <p>After the deadly wave of Covid caused by the Delta variant in India last year began to recede, mask wearing also declined. Crowded markets and tourist destinations again filled with people, mostly unmasked and not social distancing. Researchers say mask wearing in public in the country has fallen to the levels last seen in March.</p> <p>As coronavirus cases started increasing in urban centers, Prime Minister Narendra Modi told residents to be vigilant, and the chief minister of Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal, imposed a curfew, among other measures. But with the opening of election season a month off, both leaders have been seen campaigning in states that are going to the polls, holding rallies that packed in thousands of people, lots of them without masks.</p> <p>After many Indians took to social media to express their outrage at the apparent double standard, India’s top election body stepped in and banned public campaign rallies until Saturday.</p> <p>On Monday, the defense minister, Rajnath Singh, announced that he had tested positive for Covid. Mr. Singh, 70, who said on Twitter that he had mild symptoms and was quarantining at home, had addressed a rally in the northern state of Uttarakhand on Thursday.</p> <p>Over the weekend, a lawyer who was traveling at night by car in eastern Delhi fired five shots from his pistol after a dispute with police officers who had stopped him because he was violating curfew. The officers also asked the lawyer why he was not wearing a mask, as he was not alone in the car.</p> <p>No one was hurt in the episode, but the police said that they had opened an investigation.</p> <p>Last week, the police in the western state of Gujarat arrested three men after they were caught violating Covid restrictions while hosting a birthday party for their pet dog.</p> <p>Siddesh Valvaikar, a volunteer who spent time between Christmas and New Year handing out masks to people on tourist-filled beaches in Goa, said that he often got a cold stare in return.</p> <p>“When we gave them masks, people just threw them away,” he said.</p> <p>The Indian Health Ministry reported 179,723 new Covid cases on Monday, the highest number since May, and identified approximately 410 new cases of the Omicron variant. But epidemiologists warn that those numbers most likely exceed what has been reported since most of those infected are asymptomatic or have mild symptoms and did not get tested.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Hungary struggles: Covid death rate
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SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/10/world/omicron-covid-testing-vaccines#hungary-vaccination-sinopharm-sputnik
GIST	<p>As Hungary tries to combat a Covid death rate that ranks among the top 10 worst in the world, efforts by the country's medical authorities to increase immunization rates may have been hampered by claims that the national drug regulator rushed the approval process for Chinese and Russian shots.</p> <p>Vaccine skepticism in Hungary may have already hampered the country's inoculation campaign, which has lagged the progress made in several other countries in the European Union, particularly in Western Europe.</p> <p>But that was not always the case. Hungary led the way for inoculations in Europe early last year after procuring the Sputnik shot from Russia and the Sinopharm vaccine from China. The country obtained both after Viktor Orban, the far-right prime minister of Hungary, criticized the European Union's slow start to its immunization campaign.</p> <p>"It cannot be that Hungarian people are dying because vaccine procurement in Brussels is slow," Mr. Orban said in January 2021. "This is simply unacceptable," he added.</p> <p>On Friday, Hungary announced that it had received a shipment of the Russian-manufactured Sputnik Light, a one-shot vaccine, for testing.</p> <p>But Mr. Orban has also struggled to develop public health policies to curb the spread of the coronavirus, and his decision to go all-in with vaccines not approved by E.U. medicine regulators has generated significant criticism at home. Among those concerns were the speed with which the Hungarian authorities approved usage of the Chinese and Russian vaccines, which prompted fears about potential corruption, and doubts about the safety of the shots.</p> <p>In Hungary, the authorities do not publish data about which vaccines were given to people who have died of Covid. Hospitals and health care workers are also barred from speaking to the news media without prior authorization from the government. And citizens face criminal penalties for spreading false or distorted information that the government says hampers its ability to deal with the public health crisis.</p> <p>In February 2021, Dr. Gyula Kincses, president of the Hungarian Medical Chamber, called on the National Institute of Pharmacy and Nutrition, the medicines regulator, to make public the documentation relating to the approval of the Sputnik and Sinopharm vaccines. He added that, without the documentation, the chamber could not in good conscience recommend that doctors administer the shots.</p> <p>Gergely Gulyas, a deputy to Prime Minister Orban, said in April 2021 that Russia's Sputnik vaccine was among the best, "even better than the Western vaccines," and that "Sinopharm is better than Pfizer."</p> <p>In December, after months of litigation, the institute released redacted documents about the approval process.</p> <p>Akos Hadhazy, an opposition lawmaker, claimed to have circumvented the redactions. He said the redacted portions showed that Hungarian experts had reported being unable to thoroughly inspect vaccine production sites and laboratory processes and lacked information about "several important tests concerning efficacy and safety."</p> <p>Mr. Hadhazy has since filed a criminal complaint claiming that the Hungarian medical authorities had caved to political pressure and violated professional standards during the approval process for the Russian and Chinese vaccines.</p> <p>Dr. Ferenc Falus, a Hungarian former chief medical officer, said in an interview that the case illustrated how the government "broke the spine" of the National Institute of Pharmacy and Nutrition, allowing political expediency to override the proper medical processes.</p>

	Hungary's high death rate, he said, can be attributed to the lack of political will to introduce stringent public health measures, the "catastrophic" situation in health care that preceded the pandemic and the government's misleading communication on vaccines.
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HEADLINE	01/10 US, Russia deadlock over NATO expansion
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/10/world/europe/russia-us-ukraine-talks.html
GIST	<p>GENEVA — The United States and Russia emerged from seven hours of urgent negotiations on Monday staking out seemingly irreconcilable positions on the future of the NATO alliance and the deployment of troops and weapons in Eastern Europe, keeping tensions high amid fears of a Russian invasion of Ukraine.</p> <p>Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei A. Ryabkov, Russia's lead negotiator, insisted after the meeting that it was "absolutely mandatory" that Ukraine "never, never, ever" become a NATO member.</p> <p>His American counterpart, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, reiterated that the United States could never make such a pledge because "we will not allow anyone to slam closed NATO's open door policy," and she said that the United States and its allies would not stand by if Russia sought to change international borders "by force."</p> <p>The impasse left the fate of Ukraine — which was not invited to the bilateral talks — in a state of uncertainty, with Russia's military intentions far from resolved following hastily-scheduled meetings between Ms. Sherman and Mr. Ryabkov on Sunday night and on Monday.</p> <p>Still, while Russia has massed roughly 100,000 troops on its borders with Ukraine, Mr. Ryabkov told reporters "we have no intention to invade Ukraine." And both sides offered some positive assessments.</p> <p>Ms. Sherman, talking to reporters via phone after Monday's meeting, said that she saw some areas where the two countries could make progress, and Mr. Ryabkov described the talks as "very professional, deep, concrete" and that their tone "makes one more optimistic."</p> <p>The talks will continue on Wednesday in Brussels, when Russian officials meet with NATO allies, and on Thursday in Vienna, at a gathering of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which includes both Russia and Ukraine as well as the United States. Mr. Ryabkov said that the outcome of those discussions would determine whether or not Russia was willing to proceed with diplomacy.</p> <p>And he warned that if the West did not agree to Russia's demands to roll back NATO's presence in Eastern Europe, it would face unspecified consequences that would put the "security of the whole European continent" at risk.</p> <p>The ambivalent messaging from Mr. Ryabkov, alternating between cautiously conciliatory and vaguely threatening, dovetailed with new assessments about Russia's timetable for possible intervention in Ukraine, with American officials remaining deeply concerned about a possible invasion.</p> <p>But Russian forces in Ukraine have not increased in recent weeks as much as intelligence officials predicted a few weeks ago, American officials told The New York Times, signaling that President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia still may not have made up his mind about whether to proceed with an attack, or might be considering something less conventional than pouring troops over the border.</p> <p>The U.S. officials say they are preparing for everything from a full-scale invasion, to partial incursions, to cyberattacks intended to paralyze the country.</p> <p>"He tried to maintain a flexible position that would allow Putin to decide either way," Kadri Liik, a Russia specialist at the European Council on Foreign Relations in Berlin, said of Mr. Ryabkov's</p>

approach. “It will be Putin’s decision whether to continue these talks under the conditions that the U.S. makes available.”

Russia annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea and fomented a separatist war in the country’s east after the pro-Western revolution in Kyiv, Ukraine’s capital, in 2014. The war in eastern Ukraine continues to simmer, having claimed more than 13,000 Ukrainian lives on both sides.

In the last year, Mr. Putin has increasingly cast Western support for Ukraine as an existential threat, claiming that the neighboring country, formerly a Soviet republic, was being turned into an “anti-Russia” that the West could use to attack or otherwise weaken his country.

But Russia’s aims go far beyond the future of Ukraine, a position it put forth in an extraordinary set of demands to the West last month that sought to roll back NATO’s military presence to 1990s levels. It also asked for guarantees that NATO would not expand eastward or keep forces or weapons in former Soviet states that have since joined NATO.

On Monday, American officials said they saw openings for deepening the conversation with Russia — for instance on reviving the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which the United States abandoned in 2019, after years of accusing Russia of violating its terms. The treaty prohibited the deployment of missiles that can deliver a nuclear strike with next to no warning.

In Monday’s talks, the American side included some ideas around restrictions on where the United States and Russia could locate their missiles.

Right now, the United States has no intermediate-range missiles in Europe, so agreeing to ban them again would be easy, experts say. But for decades it has kept a range of tactical nuclear weapons in Belgium, Italy, Germany and Turkey, and Russia could request that those be banned as well.

Ms. Sherman, who served in the Clinton and Obama administrations and has often been handed some of the United States’ hardest negotiations, said she made clear that Washington is open to discussing “ways we can set reciprocal limits on the size and scope of military exercises and to improve transparency about those exercises.”

That would be a way of trying to get Russian forces away from Ukraine’s borders.

“The United States is committed to meaningful reciprocal dialogue with Russia,” Ms. Sherman told reporters on Monday, underscoring the Biden administration’s strategy to maintain diplomatic engagement with Russia in order to avoid war. “We must give diplomacy and dialogue the time and space required to make progress on such complex issues.”

Even without any American concessions, Monday’s talks already represented a victory of sorts for the Kremlin because they brought the issue of NATO expansion, which has long angered Mr. Putin, to the forefront of issues confronting Washington policymakers.

Ms. Liik, the analyst, said the seriousness with which the United States appeared to prepare for Monday’s talks — sending a large delegation that included officials from the Defense Department, the State Department and the National Security Council, which coordinates policy at the White House — sent an important signal to Moscow.

“We had the feeling that the American side took the Russian proposals very seriously and studied them deeply,” Mr. Ryabkov said. “Now, things are being called by their names, and this in itself has a healing effect on our relations with the West.”

Mr. Ryabkov said Russia would make a decision on whether or not to continue diplomacy after the meetings this week, warning that “the risks connected with a possible intensification of confrontation cannot be underestimated.”

But Mr. Ryabkov was vague as to what, exactly, the consequences would be if the United States refused Russia's demands. He repeatedly said that Russia had no plans to attack Ukraine and that there was "no reason to fear an escalation scenario in this regard."

But he also said that increased military activity by the West in Ukraine and in the Black Sea region had caused Russia to shift its military posture in the region, and that it was concerned about "deliberate provocations" by Ukraine.

Western officials have said they believe that Russia could manufacture a "provocation" as a pretext for an invasion.

Describing the consequences of what would happen if diplomacy fails, Mr. Ryabkov repeated Mr. Putin's wording that the West would face a "military-technical response" by Russia. He said Russia would not make public what that response would look like because doing so would invite new sanctions threats, but he indicated it could involve new deployments of certain weapons systems.

Ms. Sherman, cautious after a long career of sparring with Russian officials, was asked after the meeting whether she had realistic hope for a diplomatic solution.

"It's very hard for diplomats to do the work we do if you have no hope," she said. "So of course I have hope."

She paused briefly. "But what I care about more is results."

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HEADLINE	01/10 Russia moves helicopters; invasion sign?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/10/us/politics/russia-ukraine-helicopters.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The number of Russian troops at Ukraine's border has remained steady in recent weeks, despite U.S. intelligence predictions of a surge, but American officials say that President Vladimir V. Putin has begun taking steps to move military helicopters into place, a possible sign that planning for an attack continues.</p> <p>American officials had expected additional Russian troops to stream toward the Ukrainian border in December and early January, building toward a force of 175,000.</p> <p>While troop movements have slowed, there are still 100,000 military personnel near the border and now the Russians have positioned additional attack aircraft there, American officials said. Attack and transport helicopters, along with ground attack fighter jets, would be a critical Russian advantage, should Mr. Putin decide to invade Ukraine.</p> <p>U.S. officials say the Russian president's window for an invasion is limited, dictated by temperatures that will freeze the ground — allowing for the easy movement of heavy vehicles and equipment — before a spring thaw, which could begin by March, creates a muddy quagmire.</p> <p>But a relatively mild winter has slowed the ground's freezing, and Mr. Putin's deadline for committing his forces has slipped further toward the spring, officials say. The hard winter freeze that typically comes to Ukraine by January has not happened in many areas of the country. As long as the ground remains muddy, senior administration officials said, Mr. Putin might be forced to push back a ground offensive until February at the earliest.</p> <p>To get a better sense of possible conditions this year, the Biden administration has enlisted meteorologists to look more closely at the likely weather in Ukraine in the coming weeks, according to a U.S. official.</p>

The officials interviewed for this article requested anonymity to discuss sensitive and classified assessments of Russian military movements, along with American efforts to learn about those deployments.

The United States has been regularly flying Air Force RC-135 Rivet Joint electronic-eavesdropping planes over Ukraine since Dec. 27. The planes allow American intelligence operatives to listen to Russian ground commanders' communications. The Air Force is also flying E-8 JSTARS ground-surveillance planes to track the Russian troop buildup and the movements of the forces.

The United States is particularly interested in indications that Russia may deploy any of its tactical nuclear weapons to the border, a move that Russian officials have suggested could be an option.

The intelligence agencies have told administration officials that while the Russians have continued planning an invasion, they do not believe Mr. Putin has decided whether to begin an incursion. For their part, Russian officials [reiterated on Monday that they do not plan to invade Ukraine](#).

A fierce diplomatic push to give Mr. Putin face-saving alternatives to military action began this week in Geneva, where Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman led a U.S. delegation for talks with her Russian counterpart, Sergei A. Ryabkov, and other Russian officials.

But Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken told reporters at the State Department on Friday that "actual progress is going to be very difficult to make, if not impossible, in an environment of escalation by Russia." And after eight hours of meetings with the Russians, Ms. Sherman told reporters that such de-escalation had not occurred and that the talks had amounted merely to "a discussion, a better understanding of each other and each other's priorities."

Mr. Putin has made several demands, including that NATO formally pledge never to admit Ukraine and Georgia as members, that U.S. and NATO officials call nonstarters. Instead, the United States is dangling more modest offers, like assurances that American missiles will not be placed in Ukrainian territory — something Washington has never seriously contemplated.

Despite publicly expressing uncertainty about Mr. Putin's intentions, U.S. officials have assessed that there is little likelihood that he will back down from what they have described as maximalist positions. The Biden administration has promised allies that it will not make any offers to Russia that they do not support, taking off the table any sort of unilateral troop withdrawal from Eastern Europe or pledge not to further integrate Ukraine with the rest of Europe.

Mr. Putin has massed his forces along Russia's border with eastern Ukraine, where for nearly eight years he has supported a pro-Russian insurgency that has left up to 14,000 people dead.

In early December, American intelligence agencies predicted that Mr. Putin was planning to gather as many as 175,000 troops for a potential incursion into Ukraine.

Weeks later, Mr. Putin withdrew some [10,000 troops near Ukraine](#). But American officials said those troops were not part of the force that Mr. Putin appeared to be gathering for a potential invasion in January or February.

Still, intelligence officials thought there would be more of a troop buildup throughout December. A senior administration official said the Russian deployments were continuing, but at a slower pace than in early December.

Currently, Russia has just under 60 battalion tactical groups on the ground, or somewhere between 85,000 and 100,000 troops, according to American officials. Those troops have conducted exercises and drills, demonstrating that the Russian forces are at their highest levels of readiness.

In addition to building up aviation assets, the Russian government has ordered in more units specializing in logistics. While aviation assets would be critical to protecting ground troops during the invasion, the logistics units would be needed to support the ground forces in the event Mr. Putin orders his forces across the border.

More than 150 U.S. military advisers are in Ukraine, trainers who have for years worked out of the training ground near Lviv, in the country's west, far from the front lines. The current group includes Special Operations forces, mostly Army Green Berets, as well as National Guard trainers from Florida's 53rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team.

Military advisers from about a dozen allied countries are also in Ukraine, U.S. officials said. Several NATO countries, including Britain, Canada, Lithuania and Poland, have regularly sent training forces to the country.

In the event of a full-scale Russian invasion, the United States intends to move its military trainers out of the country quickly. But it is possible that some Americans could stay to advise Ukrainian officials in Kyiv, the capital, or provide front-line support, a U.S. official said.

Pentagon officials have warned their Russian counterparts that they need to de-escalate the situation, because an invasion would not end well for Moscow. Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, spoke bluntly to Gen. Valery Gerasimov, Russia's chief of the general staff, on Dec. 22. Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III followed that with more diplomatic comments to Russia's defense minister, Sergei K. Shoigu, on Thursday.

On Monday, General Milley spoke with his Ukrainian counterpart, Lt. Gen. Valery Zaluzhny, about the Russian troop presence and the security situation.

There is still no consensus within the administration, much less the alliance, on how or when to support an insurgency in Ukraine should Russia conduct a full-scale invasion, expand its presence in the Donbas region or some other scenario, according to a senior administration official. Officials in the Biden administration are intensely debating what the available options might be depending on which situations play out.

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HEADLINE	01/10 NYC fire: malfunctioning door flue effect
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/10/nyregion/bronx-apartment-fire-smoke.html
GIST	<p>The 17 people killed in a Bronx fire this week all died from inhaling smoke that poured through a single malfunctioning door and billowed to the top of the 19-story building, New York City officials said on Monday, as they investigated how a fire that barely spread beyond one unit became the city's most lethal in three decades.</p> <p>The fire's origin appeared straightforward: A space heater that had been left running continuously burst into flames, officials said. A day later, though, residents remained stunned by the speed with which the smoke inundated the building, killing and critically injuring so many people in broad daylight, even as firefighters arrived within minutes.</p> <p>The tower, considered a model affordable housing project when it was constructed in 1972, did not have a building-wide sprinkler system, as was allowed under the law. But it was deadly smoke sucked into an internal stairwell, not flames, that overcame residents as they fled the building.</p> <p>As the fire burned, the smoke was drawn through the broken door on the third floor toward an open stairwell door high above on the 15th floor.</p> <p>"If you have that door on the upper floors open, that's really going to give you a flue effect, like a chimney, and that's what occurred," said Jim Long, a spokesman for the Fire Department.</p>

Fifteen people remained in critical condition on Monday, officials said. Mayor Eric Adams revised the official death count, saying that the city now believed that 17 people had died as of Monday afternoon, eight of them children, down from the 19 initially reported on Sunday.

“It was the smoke that took these lives, not the fire itself,” Mr. Adams said in a radio interview on 1010 WINS. He added that any maintenance issues related to the self-closing door remaining wide open would be part of the investigation into the fire.

With fire marshals and cleaning crews in white protective suits still combing the singed and smoke-stained tower, brutal images of the scene rippled from East 181st Street through the Bronx and New York City, and as far away as Gambia, the small West African nation from which many of the victims had emigrated.

Most of the deceased had not yet been publicly identified, as the city medical examiner labored to contact grieving relatives who could confirm their identities virtually because of ongoing health concerns around the coronavirus pandemic.

Shocked neighbors, family members and friends hunted for those still missing after the fire, with some traveling from hospital to hospital. Schoolteachers mourned the children missing from their classrooms, and the dozens of families displaced from the tower, Twin Parks North West, fanned out across the Bronx into temporary shelters uncertain when — or if — they would be able to return.

“We are calling 311, we are calling the hospital, we are calling the police department,” said Musa Kabba, the imam of Masjid-Ur-Rahmah, a storefront mosque on Webster Avenue, which serves a largely Gambian population. “We have no information, nobody is giving us nothing since yesterday.”

He feared that several members of the mosque had died.

Dawda Docka Fadera, Gambia’s ambassador to the United States, traveled from Washington to New York to see the site for himself.

“We are a very small country of about less than two million people, and we are all related,” he said. “Everybody knows everybody, so our country is currently in a state of shock.”

City, state and federal leaders said they were moving as quickly as they could to provide an accurate accounting. At a news conference just outside the tower Monday afternoon, they vowed to provide immediate financial support and housing for those affected by the fire, and to look at possible legal changes to address any deficiencies in the city’s fire code uncovered by investigators. President Biden called Mr. Adams to offer assistance.

The mayor, in only his second week on the job, vowed to “double down” on a decades-old campaign by the city to raise awareness about the importance of closing doors during a fire, starting in schools.

“Muscle memory is everything and if we can drill that in, we can save lives by closing doors not just in New York City but across the entire globe,” Mr. Adams said. He also began raising money for victims through a city fund.

Even with the revised death count, the fire was believed to be the deadliest in New York City since 1990, when 87 people died amid a fire intentionally set at a Bronx nightclub.

The city’s fire commissioner, Daniel A. Nigro, blamed the numeric error on “a bit of a double count” by authorities trying to locate missing residents who had been scattered around the city. He cautioned that the fatality count could yet rise again based on those evacuated from the building still in hospitals “fighting for their lives on Monday.”

Space heaters, particularly older models, are a well-known risk. Nationally, the use of space heaters has been linked to about 1,700 residential fires a year, resulting in roughly 80 deaths and 160 injuries, according to estimates by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.

The commission opened an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the Bronx fire, including looking into whether the space heater had been defective, said Patty Davis, a spokeswoman for the commission. Officials did not name the model of the heater.

In interviews, residents of the tower said such devices were a fixture in many units during cold snaps, like the one currently gripping New York, to supplement built-in radiators. A New York City housing survey found that low-income neighborhoods in the Bronx, Brooklyn and northern Manhattan that are historically home to communities of color have a higher percentage of residences that rely on supplemental heating sources.

“Every winter we would always have space heaters or use the oven or boil water,” said Fatiah Touray, 38, whose family was among the first Gambian immigrants to move into the building in 1983.

Commissioner Nigro said that the fire that broke out on Sunday from the “faulty” heater did not spread much beyond the unit itself. But, crucially, when the residents in the unit fled the flames, they did not shut the door to the hallway behind them. And though the door had a self-closing mechanism required by New York City law, it did not function properly.

“The door was not obstructed,” Commissioner Nigro said. “The door when it was fully opened stayed fully opened because it malfunctioned.”

Smoke spread quickly into the hallway and then into the building’s internal stairwells, the main means for residents to evacuate. Commissioner Nigro said that another door was also left open to the stairwell on the 15th floor, pulling “dangerous” fumes up through the building. He noted that the 15th floor in particular “became quite untenable.”

Fire alarms in the building went off immediately, but false alarms were routine, and many residents said they had become accustomed to ignoring them. In the end, the commissioner said, people would have been safest if they had stayed in their apartments themselves, rather than seeking to evacuate.

City officials have not yet said where residents died in the building, but residents and their family members suggested in interviews that the stairwells had proved particularly lethal.

“There were people that I understand, from talking with my neighbors, they were trying to go down the stairs, and they were tripping over bodies,” said Renee Howard, 68, who was sheltering Monday afternoon at nearby Monroe College in the Bronx after evacuating her home of 30 years. “Oh! Jesus. Help us, God.”

One family of five appeared to have left their apartment on the top floor in an effort to flee to safety, only to be overcome by smoke, officials told the family’s relatives. The family, the Dukurays, had three children between age 5 to 12, and the relatives said they now believed all five were dead.

“I wish I could do anything to tell them not to come out from the house,” one of the relatives, Hawa Dukuray, said. “I think they maybe tried to escape.”

She said she was told that by the time they reached “the middle,” they could not see through the smoke.

Problems with the self-closing doors do not appear to have been an entirely new issue for the building. Between 2014 and 2019, the city housing department had issued violations for problems with self-closing doors to four different apartments and one stairway. Records show another complaint about a problem with a self-closing door to an apartment in 2021. All had been resolved.

	<p>There had been complaints over a lack of adequate heating, including three in 2021. Those were also resolved, according to city records, and Mr. Adams said on Monday that there had been no outstanding complaints about heating.</p> <p>The building has been owned since early 2020 by a trio of investors: LIHC Investment Group, Belveron Partners and Camber Property Group. One of Camber's executives, Rick Gropper, served as a housing adviser to Mr. Adams and contributed \$400 to his mayoral campaign, the maximum amount allowed for those doing business with the city. He and other business associates have donated to other Democrats as well.</p> <p>Judith Goldiner, attorney in charge of the civil law reform unit at the Legal Aid Society, a nonprofit that is helping some tenants of the building find new homes, said that deadly fires in New York City have generally occurred in older buildings with many problems, such as a lack of smoke detectors or blocked fire exits.</p> <p>But whereas most of the city's housing stock was built before World War II, the Bronx high-rise was only built in the early 1970s and was said to be in a state of relatively good repair.</p> <p>"That's why it's so surprising that this happened," she said. "That makes you think there's something that happened here that you would not have expected."</p> <p>Ms. Goldiner said there may have been other problems identified in state and federal inspections of the building, which have not been made public.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Lawsuit: elite colleges in price-fixing cartel
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/10/us/financial-aid-lawsuit-colleges.html
GIST	<p>A lawsuit filed in federal court on Monday accused 16 of the nation's leading private universities and colleges of conspiring to reduce the financial aid they award to admitted students through a price-fixing cartel.</p> <p>The lawsuit, filed in federal court in Chicago on behalf of five former undergraduates who attended some of the universities named in the suit, takes aim at a decades-old antitrust exemption granted to these universities for financial aid decisions and claims that the colleges have overcharged an estimated 170,000 students who were eligible for financial aid over nearly two decades.</p> <p>The universities accused of wrongdoing are Brown, the California Institute of Technology, the University of Chicago, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Duke, Emory, Georgetown, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Northwestern, Notre Dame, the University of Pennsylvania, Rice, Vanderbilt and Yale.</p> <p>The allegations hinge on a methodology for calculating financial need. The 16 schools collaborate in an organization called the 568 Presidents Group that uses a consensus approach to evaluating a student's ability to pay, according to the lawsuit.</p> <p>Under federal antitrust law, these universities are permitted to collaborate on financial aid formulas if they do not consider a student's ability to pay in the admissions process, a status called "need blind." The group's name is derived from a section of federal law permitting such collaborations: Section 568 of the Higher Education Act.</p> <p>The suit claims that nine of the schools are not actually need blind because for many years, they have found ways to consider some applicants' ability to pay.</p> <p>The University of Pennsylvania and Vanderbilt, for example, have considered the financial needs of wait-listed applicants, the lawsuit says. Other schools, the lawsuit says, award "special treatment to the children of wealthy" donors, which, given the limited number of spots, hurts students needing financial aid.</p>

The lawsuit claims that the actions of these nine schools — Columbia, Dartmouth, Duke, Georgetown, M.I.T., Northwestern, Notre Dame, the University of Pennsylvania and Vanderbilt — render the actions of all 16 universities unlawful, turning it into what the suit calls “the 568 Cartel.”

“Privileging the wealthy and disadvantaging the financially needy are inextricably linked,” the suit said. “They are two sides of the same coin.”

Peter McDonough, vice president and general counsel of the American Council on Education, an industry organization whose 2,000 college and university president members include leaders of the 16 schools, said the case was similar to antitrust litigation the Justice Department filed against Ivy League schools and M.I.T. in the 1990s.

Ultimately, he said, M.I.T. obtained a favorable federal appeals court ruling and the Justice Department settled its claims.

“I’d be surprised to ultimately find that there’s fire where this smoke is being sent up today,” Mr. McDonough said, noting that the schools named in the complaint were “very antitrust aware and particularly sophisticated. They have good advice provided to them.”

Several institutions, including Columbia, Duke and Rice, declined to comment on the pending litigation. Karen Peart, a spokeswoman for Yale, said the university’s “financial aid policy is 100 percent compliant with all applicable laws.”

The lawsuit is merely the latest legal action that raises questions about the admissions practices at elite universities and colleges — including [the Operation Varsity Blues scandal](#), in which wealthy and well-connected donors were shown to have bought their children’s admission to college, and claims that admissions at top-ranked universities are [based on racial quotas](#).

A Supreme Court decision is believed to be imminent on whether the court will [consider two cases on affirmative action in admissions](#), one against [Harvard](#) and another against [the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill](#).

Neither university is named in the financial aid lawsuit.

But the lawsuit stated that Harvard, among other universities, declined to join the 568 group because it “would have yielded financial-aid packages that were smaller than what Harvard wanted to award.”

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HEADLINE	01/11 Seoul: NKorea second missile test in week
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/world/asia/north-korea-ballistic-missile-south-korea.html
GIST	<p>SEOUL — North Korea launched a ballistic missile off its east coast on Tuesday, its second weapons test in a week, as the United Nations Security Council met to discuss the country’s growing missile threat.</p> <p>The South Korean military said its analysts, as well as United States officials, were studying the trajectory and other flight data of the North Korean test to learn more about the missile.</p> <p>North Korea conducted its last missile test on Wednesday, when it launched what it called a hypersonic missile off its east coast. But the South Korean military dismissed the claim, saying that the weapon was a common ballistic missile.</p> <p>The North’s test on Wednesday was its second test of such a weapon since September. The tests are in violation of multiple U.N. Security Council resolutions that ban North Korea from developing or testing ballistic missiles or nuclear devices.</p>

North Korea's actions on Tuesday local time occurred as the Security Council met at the U.N. headquarters in New York to discuss the country's last ballistic missile test, which envoys from the United States, Japan, France, Britain and two other countries called "a threat to international peace and security."

"Each missile launch serves not only to advance the D.P.R.K.'s own capabilities, but to expand the suite of weapons available for export to its illicit arms clients and dealers around the world," the envoys said in a joint statement, using the acronym for the North's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. "The D.P.R.K. makes these military investments at the expense of the well-being of the North Korean people."

The envoys urged the council to "stand united in opposing the D.P.R.K.'s ongoing, destabilizing and unlawful actions," and called on all U.N. member states to "fulfill their sanctions obligations under the Security Council resolutions."

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida of Japan told reporters on Tuesday morning, "It is extremely regrettable that North Korea launched a missile in this situation."

North Korea has not tested any long-range missiles of the kind that could directly threaten the continental United States since it conducted three intercontinental ballistic missile tests in 2017. But since attempts at diplomacy by its leader, Kim Jong-un, with President Donald J. Trump collapsed in 2019, the country has resumed testing mostly short-range missiles, including ones launched from trains rolled out of tunnels.

Those tests indicated that the North was developing more sophisticated ways of delivering nuclear and other warheads to South Korea, Japan and American bases, according to defense analysts. Some of the missiles it has tested since 2019 have used solid fuel and have made midair maneuvers, making them harder to intercept, defense analysts said.

After the I.C.B.M. tests in 2017, Mr. Kim claimed that his country had the ability to launch a nuclear strike against the continental United States. Then he met Mr. Trump three times between 2018 and 2019 to push the United States to ease sanctions imposed under Security Council resolutions.

The Kim-Trump diplomacy collapsed without an agreement on rolling back the North's nuclear weapons program or lifting international sanctions.

During a five-day Workers' Party meeting that ended on Dec. 31 in Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, Mr. Kim said conditions in his country demanded "bolstering the state defense capability" without "a moment's delay."

But he also [said](#) his country should focus on alleviating chronic food shortages — a problem that he inherited from Kim Jong-il, his father and predecessor, who died 10 years ago, and which the North has yet to fix.

North Korea remains extremely wary of any contact with the outside world during the [coronavirus pandemic](#), and has claimed no cases of the virus in the country, which outside experts have questioned.

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HEADLINE	01/10 'Deaths of despair' spiked in WA 2020
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/data/deaths-of-despair-spiked-in-washington-in-2020-exceeding-deaths-from-covid-19/
GIST	They've come to be known as "deaths of despair" — fatalities from drug overdoses, alcohol use, and suicide. Research has shown they've been on the rise for decades in the United States, and have contributed to the decline in life expectancy over the last few years.

Since the start of the pandemic, we've understandably paid a lot of attention to deaths from COVID-19. But the pandemic may have led to far more deaths than just those directly attributed to the virus.

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that deaths of despair spiked during 2020. In Washington, drug overdoses, alcohol use and suicide accounted for about 3,900 deaths, according to my analysis of the data. That's an increase of almost 600 deaths from 2019.

In fact, it also exceeds the number of Washingtonians who died from COVID in 2020, which the CDC pegs at nearly 3,300. COVID was the fifth leading cause of death in the state in 2020.

According to my analysis, Washington is one of only eight states where deaths of despair outnumbered COVID deaths in 2020. The others are Oregon, Utah, Maine, Vermont, West Virginia, Alaska and Hawaii. These states, with the exception of West Virginia, had the lowest COVID death rates in 2020. They also, with the exception of Utah, had deaths of despair rates above the national average. West Virginia had the highest rate of deaths of despair.

Nationally, deaths from drug overdoses and alcohol use both increased significantly in 2020, but [deaths by suicide declined](#) a little. This pattern held true in Washington, as well.

Many public health experts had been worried about a spike in suicides because of the economic and emotional hardships brought on by the pandemic. While this didn't happen for the overall population, there was an increase among certain groups, including young people (below 35 years) and among Black, Hispanic and Native American men. The rates decreased for white and Asian men, and decreased or remained unchanged for women among all racial/ethnic groups.

It may seem counterintuitive, but suicide rates [typically fall](#) during times of national crisis — at least initially — as people tend to pull together.

In Washington there were 1,212 deaths from intentional self-harm in 2020, 50 fewer than in 2019. But suicides did increase among certain groups here, including younger people (those under age 45). There was also an increase in the number of suicides among Hispanic men and women, and Asian women.

The biggest increase in deaths of despair in Washington was among deaths caused by drug overdoses and alcohol poisoning, reflecting the crises in opioid and methamphetamine addiction. These accounted for 1,641 deaths in 2020, an increase of nearly 500 from 2019.

The rates of these deaths increased among both men and women, among all the major racial/ethnic groups, and across all age groups.

There was also a spike in deaths from liver disease caused directly by alcohol use. More than 1,000 Washingtonians died from alcoholic liver disease in 2020, up about 150 from 2019. Again, the rates increased among both men and women, among all the major racial/ethnic groups, and across age groups (starting with the 25- to 34-year-old cohort).

Much of the conversation around deaths of despair has centered on white, working-class people. That's because the initial research on this subject by Princeton economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton — they coined the term “deaths of despair” — focused on the dramatic rise in these deaths among this demographic since the 1990s.

Their research showed how white working-class people (men, in particular) were dying of these causes at an unprecedented rate, and they linked this trend to rising income inequality, unemployment and other economic factors tied to the erosion of America's working class.

But the rise in deaths of despair is also evident among other groups.

	<p>In Washington, from 2015 to 2020, Native American men and women died from these causes at the highest rate in Washington, followed by white men. Black men had the fourth-highest rate.</p> <p>The rates were lowest for Asian men and women, and Hispanic women.</p> <p>Although there is a wide variance in the rates of deaths of despair along racial/ethnic and gender lines, the rates have been increasing across the board in Washington. The economic and emotional hardships brought on by the pandemic seem to have contributed to the increase in these deaths in 2020.</p> <p>There is also a significant gap between urban and rural Washington in deaths of despair. These deaths are far more likely to occur in rural parts of the state, which also tend to be poorer.</p> <p>King County has one of the lowest rates of deaths of despair. However, the number of these deaths also increased in King County during the pandemic. In 2020, the age-adjusted rate of deaths from these causes was 40 per 100,000 population.</p> <p>In Jefferson County, the rate was 98 per 100,000. Other Washington counties with very high rates in 2020 include Clallam, Lewis, Yakima and Grays Harbor.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Hospitalizations surpass last winter's peak
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/10/world/omicron-covid-testing-vaccines#us-hospitalizations-have-surpassed-last-winters-peak
GIST	<p>The number of Americans hospitalized with Covid-19 has surpassed last winter's peak, underscoring the severity of the threat the virus continues to pose as the extremely contagious Omicron variant tears through the United States.</p> <p>As of Sunday, 142,388 patients with the virus were hospitalized nationwide, according to data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, surpassing the peak of 142,315 reported on Jan. 14 of last year. The seven-day average of daily hospitalizations was 132,086, an increase of 83 percent from two weeks ago.</p> <p>The Omicron wave has overwhelmed hospitals and depleted staff who were already worn out by the Delta variant. It has been driven in large part by people younger than 60. Among people older than 60, daily admissions are still lower than last winter.</p> <p>The hospitalization totals also include people who test positive for the virus incidentally after being admitted for conditions unrelated to Covid-19; there is no national data showing how many people are in that category.</p> <p>As cases soared over the past few weeks to an average of over 737,000 per day, far higher than last winter's peak, public health officials have argued that caseloads were of limited significance because Omicron is less virulent than Delta and other variants, and vaccines, and especially boosters, offered protection against severe illness.</p> <p>But the surge's sheer volume has overwhelmed hospitals across the country. And outside of cities like New York, where Omicron hit early and has pushed hospitals to the brink, it is unlikely to have peaked. Current hospitalizations are one of the most reliable measures of the severity of the pandemic over time, because they are not influenced by testing availability or by spikes in minor cases.</p> <p>Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the country's top infectious diseases expert, told ABC News last week that it was "much more relevant to focus on the hospitalizations," which lag cases.</p> <p>About a quarter of U.S. hospitals are experiencing critical staffing shortages, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. Some states, like Oregon, have deployed the National Guard to help.</p>

	<p>Others, like Illinois and Massachusetts, are delaying elective surgeries — meaning surgeries that are scheduled, as opposed to an emergency, a category that can include procedures like a mastectomy for a cancer patient. In some cases, employees with asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic coronavirus infections have been working, potentially putting patients at risk.</p> <p>After nearly two years, “even the most dedicated individuals are going to be tired and worn out, if not burned out and dealing with mental health issues as a consequence,” said Dr. Mahshid Abir, an emergency physician at the University of Michigan and a researcher at the RAND Corporation.</p> <p>Doctors, nurses and other medical personnel are also falling ill themselves, and while the vast majority are vaccinated and haven’t needed hospitalization, their illness still keeps them out of work, reducing staffing just when it is needed most.</p> <p>“The demand is going up and the supply is going down, and that basically doesn’t paint a good picture for people and communities, not just for Covid but for everything else,” Dr. Abir said, alluding to the fact that hospitals overwhelmed by coronavirus patients are ill equipped to handle other emergencies, from heart attacks to appendicitis to traumatic injuries.</p> <p>Data in some of the first cities hit by Omicron also show deaths spiking sharply — not as fast as case rates, but fast enough to warn of more devastation to come.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Chicago, teachers’ union reach deal
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/10/world/omicron-covid-testing-vaccines#chicago-schools-deal-covid
GIST	<p>Mayor Lori Lightfoot announced a deal with the Chicago Teachers Union on Monday that would return students to classrooms on Wednesday after a dispute over coronavirus safeguards canceled a week of classes in the country’s third-largest school district.</p> <p>“No one is more frustrated than I am,” Ms. Lightfoot said after the deal was reached. She added: “I’m glad that we’re hopefully putting this behind us and looking forward. But there does come a point when enough is enough.”</p> <p>The deal, which city officials said included provisions for additional testing and metrics that would close schools with major virus outbreaks, was approved by the union’s House of Delegates on Monday night and was expected to be voted on later in the week by rank-and-file teachers.</p> <p>Teachers were expected to return to school buildings on Tuesday, with students joining them the next day. Leaders of the union described the agreement as imperfect and were highly critical of Ms. Lightfoot, but they said the deal was needed given the conditions teachers are facing in the pandemic.</p> <p>“This agreement is the only modicum of safety that is available for anyone that steps foot in the Chicago Public Schools, especially in the places in the city where testing is low and where vaccination rates are low,” Stacy Davis Gates, the union’s vice president, said.</p> <p>School leaders across the country have scrambled to adjust to the highly infectious Omicron variant, which has pushed the country’s daily case totals to record levels and led to record hospitalizations. Most school districts have forged ahead with in-person instruction, as the Biden administration has urged, sometimes quarantining individual students or classrooms as outbreaks emerge. Some large districts, including in Milwaukee and Cleveland, have moved class online.</p> <p>But the debate in Chicago proved uniquely bitter and unpredictable, with hundreds of thousands of children pulled out of class two days after winter break when teachers voted to stop reporting to their classrooms. Rather than teach online, as the union proposed, the school district canceled class altogether.</p> <p>Chicago Public Schools leaders have insisted that virus precautions were in place and that pausing in-person instruction would unfairly burden parents and harm students’ academic and social progress. Union</p>

members said that the schools were not safe, that more testing was needed and that classes should be temporarily moved online.

The Chicago area, like much of the country, is averaging far more new cases each day than at any previous point in the pandemic. The Omicron variant is believed to cause less severe illness than prior forms of the virus, with vaccinated people unlikely to face severe outcomes. Still, coronavirus hospitalizations in Illinois have exceeded their peak levels from last winter and continue to rise sharply.

Relations between the Chicago Teachers Union and City Hall have been extraordinarily tense for a decade, stretching across the tenures of Ms. Lightfoot and her predecessor, Rahm Emanuel. In 2019, months before the pandemic, teachers [went on strike](#) for 11 days and extracted concessions from Ms. Lightfoot on pay, class sizes and support staff. A year ago, when schools [first returned to in-person instruction](#), the city and union engaged in weeks of tense negotiations.

Members of Ms. Lightfoot's administration have defended the school system's efforts to make classrooms safe and have emphasized that children rarely face severe outcomes from Covid-19. But their efforts to reassure parents and teachers have sometimes faltered. The district instituted an optional testing plan over winter break, but most of the 150,000 or so mail-in P.C.R. tests given to students were never returned; of the ones that were, a majority produced invalid results.

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HEADLINE	01/10 Insurers to pay 8 at-home tests per month
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/10/world/omicron-covid-testing-vaccines#private-insurers-must-cover-eight-at-home-virus-tests-a-person-per-month-the-biden-administration-says
GIST	<p>Private insurers will have to cover the cost of eight at-home coronavirus tests per member per month starting on Saturday, the Biden administration said Monday.</p> <p>People who provide their insurance information will be able to get the tests with no out-of-pocket costs at certain pharmacies; in other cases, they will have to file claims to their insurers for reimbursement, according to the Department of Health and Human Services, just as they often do for medical services.</p> <p>The plan “incentivizes insurers to cover these costs up front and ensures individuals do not need an order from their health care provider to access these tests for free,” the agency said in a statement. Roughly 150 million Americans, or about 45 percent of the population, are privately insured.</p> <p>Insurers that do not require people to pay the upfront cost for tests at certain retailers will be charged no more than \$12 per test, if the test was purchased at an out-of-network site. Otherwise, insurers will be charged the full price of a test.</p> <p>“Today’s action further removes financial barriers and expands access to Covid-19 tests for millions of people,” Chiquita Brooks-LaSure, the Biden administration’s Medicare and Medicaid chief, said in a statement.</p> <p>The at-home tests are typically sold in packs of two, and prices have ranged in cost from \$14 to \$34, which can be prohibitively expensive especially when tests are purchased in bulk. Tests ordered or administered by a health provider would continue to be covered by insurance without co-payment or a deductible, the administration said.</p> <p>Other countries have spent more heavily on rapid testing. In Britain, citizens can use a government website to order free rapid tests for home use. Germany invested hundreds of millions of dollars to create a network of 15,000 rapid testing sites. The United States has instead focused public purchasing on vaccines and efforts to encourage their uptake.</p>

	<p>Some local governments in the United States have invested more heavily in rapid testing to counter this latest wave of cases. Washington, D.C., for example, now allows residents to pick up four free rapid tests daily at eight libraries across the city.</p> <p>The new U.S. policy does not apply to at-home tests that Americans have already purchased. The Biden administration is also working on other efforts to get tests to people regardless of their insurance status, including a plan to deliver 500 million free rapid tests to the homes of Americans who order them, starting later this month.</p> <p>Like that plan, the guidelines announced Monday were part of a broader effort the Biden administration has undertaken in recent weeks to catch up to skyrocketing demand for rapid tests, as virus cases have exploded around the nation with the arrival of the highly contagious Omicron variant.</p> <p>Supplies of the tests at pharmacies and grocery stores quickly diminished last month, and manufacturers are racing to restock shelves, a scramble that has prompted some experts to criticize the administration for being caught flat-footed ahead of a winter surge.</p> <p>Availability could at first hinder the rollout of the reimbursement policy, said Lindsey Dawson, an associate director at the Kaiser Family Foundation who has researched the availability of rapid tests. “If reimbursement exists but there aren’t tests to purchase,” she said, “that doesn’t help an individual consumer.”</p> <p>She added, “The policy could certainly drive demand, and could exacerbate the problem.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 CDC advises against travel to Canada
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/10/world/omicron-covid-testing-vaccines#the-cdc-advises-against-travel-to-canada
GIST	<p>The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Monday advised Americans to avoid travel to Canada, citing “very high” levels of the coronavirus.</p> <p>Canada was placed under a Level 4 travel health notice — the highest category — joining several countries, including France, Germany, Britain, Spain, South Africa and others. The Caribbean island of Curaçao was also placed under Level 4 travel notice on Monday.</p> <p>“Because of the current situation in Canada, even fully vaccinated travelers may be at risk for getting and spreading Covid-19 variants,” the C.D.C. said.</p> <p>Through Sunday, Canada had reported a daily average of 42,062 new infections, an increase of 169 percent over the past two weeks, according to a New York Times database.</p> <p>Travel between the two countries has only resumed recently. The U.S. land border reopened to Canadian travelers on Nov. 8. Americans have been allowed to travel to Canada since Aug. 9 as long as they had been fully vaccinated at least two weeks before traveling.</p> <p>For those who must travel to Canada, the C.D.C. recommends being fully vaccinated. Those who are fully vaccinated are eligible to enter Canada, but must also be tested beforehand.</p> <p>The Canadian government recently announced that starting on Saturday, certain groups of people, who were previously exempt from entry requirements, will be allowed to travel to the country only if they are fully vaccinated.</p> <p>They include professional athletes, certain temporary foreign workers and essential service providers, including truck drivers.</p>

	<p>The move has raised concerns from certain groups, including the National Propane Gas Association and the Canadian Propane Gas Association, which said in a statement that the mandate may cause “significant logistics disruptions or delays.”</p> <p>In December, the Canadian government issued its own travel health notice, advising Canadians to avoid nonessential travel out of the country, regardless of their vaccination status.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 More protests roil German cities
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/10/world/omicron-covid-testing-vaccines#germany-braces-for-more-protests-as-vaccine-rules-tighten-across-europe
GIST	<p>Tens of thousands of protesters in cities across Germany demonstrated again on Monday to vent their anger at the country’s pandemic restrictions, as reports of rising coronavirus cases worsen frictions between public health officials in Europe and their fatigued and frustrated populations.</p> <p>The turnout for the protests appeared to be smaller in some cities than on previous Mondays, but it was not clear whether that signaled any waning of anger or had more to do with the demonstrations spreading to more days of the week.</p> <p>The new German government’s postponement of a parliamentary debate on a proposed national vaccine mandate, a flash point for many protesters, may also have sapped some urgency from the protests, at least for now.</p> <p>In Rostock, a large port city on the Baltic coast, officers used tear gas to keep a rowdy group of protesters from breaking a police line. But in general, the protests on Monday appeared to come off without violence.</p> <p>Developments in two nations where cases are rising fast — they have nearly doubled in Germany and more than quadrupled in Italy over the past two weeks — encapsulate the tensions in many European countries where leaders are doubling down on Covid-19 vaccinations and boosters, edging closer to making them all but mandatory.</p> <p>Almost seven out of 10 people in the European Union have been fully vaccinated, according to official data, and the figures are even higher in Italy (75 percent) and Germany (72 percent).</p> <p>The authorized vaccines, which have been shown to provide good protection against severe illness and death, are readily available in most of Europe, and governments have increasingly come to see people who still refuse to get vaccinated as an obstacle to their efforts to avoid imposing painful measures like lockdowns to rein in the highly transmissible Omicron variant.</p> <p>The challenge was expressed in harsh language last week by President Emmanuel Macron of France, who said in a newspaper interview that he wanted to “piss off” the millions of his compatriots who have declined the shots by barring them from public spaces. Thousands of protesters took to the streets in France on Saturday in opposition to proposals that would effectively ban unvaccinated people from public areas.</p> <p>Protesters also came out in large numbers in Vienna, where vaccination will be mandatory for all adults starting next month.</p> <p>In Germany, where the strident anti-vaccination movement has ties to far-right political groups, social restrictions and rules that shut the unvaccinated out of much of public life have prompted large protests on Mondays — the same day of the week as the demonstrations that helped bring down the Berlin Wall in 1989 Some protests have turned violent.</p>

	<p>Chancellor Olaf Scholz used a New Year's speech to rebut misinformation that vaccines were unsafe. Some members of his coalition government worry about possible violence when lawmakers begin debating the bill to make vaccination mandatory.</p> <p>In Italy, where opposition to vaccines is less fierce, a rule took effect Monday requiring all workers who are 50 or older to be vaccinated or to show that they have recently recovered from an infection.</p> <p>Those who don't meet the requirement by Feb. 1 could be suspended from their jobs. The measure is among the latest steps by the government of one of Europe's worst-affected nations to curb a steep rise in infections and mitigate the impact on hospitals.</p> <p>Italy is focusing the mandate on older workers because they have tended to be more susceptible to serious illness from the virus than younger people have. Until now, those employees could take frequent P.C.R. tests that, if negative, allowed them to enter their workplaces without being vaccinated.</p> <p>Other new measures taking effect in Italy on Monday bar people who are neither vaccinated nor have recently recovered from infection from using public transportation or entering banks and other offices, restaurants, hotels, ski lifts and many other public places.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Italy hunkers down under fresh restrictions
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/10/world/omicron-covid-testing-vaccines#italy-hunkers-down-under-fresh-restrictions-as-new-cases-skyrocket
GIST	<p>Cities in Italy appeared quiet on Monday morning as the latest restrictions to curb the rise of coronavirus infections took effect.</p> <p>People could no longer use public transportation without proof of either vaccination or a recovery after a positive test in the past six months, and all passengers were required to wear the more protective FFP2-type masks. Both private and public employees were encouraged to work remotely if possible, and banks, public offices, restaurants, bars, gyms and culture centers required customers to show a health pass to enter.</p> <p>"The metro ride this morning felt very different from the last few weeks," said Maria Francesca Rotondaro, a communications specialist who commuted to her office in the city center from her home in the eastern part of Rome. "Everybody wore protective masks and sat at a distance," she noted. "Before Christmas, it was a mess. Overcrowded buses, and passengers pushing as if it was 2019."</p> <p>Italy recorded 101,762 new coronavirus cases on Monday, below the recent 7-day average of about 158,000 new cases a day but still several times higher than the average of two weeks earlier. Deaths rose 44 percent over the same period, to an average of 199 a day; the figure for Monday was 227.</p> <p>Simone Torvi, an accountant in Rome who often takes the subway, said that most riders seemed to be complying with the new rules. "I didn't see anybody checking, but people did wear their masks, and I assume they had their passes," he said.</p> <p>A spokesman for ATAC, the company that runs most of Rome's public transportation, said that inspectors could ask passengers at random to show their health passes to help enforce the new measures. Officers caught one man on Monday riding a bus with no health pass and a less protective surgical mask near the Termini railway station.</p> <p>The rules applied to anyone 12 or older. Some unvaccinated students rode bicycles to school or were driven by their parents instead of using public transportation, while others simply stayed home, further lowering already reduced attendance.</p>

	<p>“Schools are decimated anyway,” said Mario Rusconi, president of the principal’s association in the region that includes Rome. “From 5 to 10 percent of teachers in Italy are home sick with Covid or quarantining; many parents of pupils in elementary schools chose not to send them until they are fully vaccinated.”</p> <p>Only 4 percent of children 5 to 12 years old are vaccinated in Italy, where they became eligible only last month.</p> <p>Mr. Rusconi was among the principals who asked the Italian Education Ministry to postpone reopening schools after the holiday break to allow more students to get vaccinated and to try and track infections among them. Still, the authorities decided to start classes on Monday everywhere in Italy except the Campania region in the south, where they will reopen Tuesday after a court voided the regional president’s order to keep them closed until February.</p> <p>Reports of doctors and nurses helping people get false health certificates keep springing up in the Italian news media. A nurse in Ancona was arrested on Monday and accused of helping produce about 45 fake passes by pretending to administer vaccine shots and then discarding them instead.</p> <p>Pope Francis, in an address to diplomats on Monday, called health care “a moral obligation” and spoke strongly in favor of getting as many people vaccinated as possible, saying it was “the most reasonable solution for the prevention of the disease.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Breakouts and lockdowns in China cities
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/10/world/omicron-covid-testing-vaccines#china-covid-omicron-beijing-olympics
GIST	<p>When China’s leader Xi Jinping inspected the Beijing Winter Olympics venues last week, he laid out his vision for a “green, safe and simple” event.</p> <p>But diplomatic boycotts and, increasingly, the fast-spreading Omicron variant of the coronavirus may make safety and simplicity near impossible to achieve, at least by Beijing’s stringent “zero Covid” standards.</p> <p>With less than a month to go until the opening of the Winter Games, Chinese officials are racing to extinguish a spate of coronavirus infections around the country, including several locally transmitted cases of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>On Monday, officials in Tianjin, a northern Chinese port city of 14 million, reported 21 domestically transmitted cases, according to China’s National Health Commission, bringing the total over the last two days to 40, including at least two cases of the Omicron variant.</p> <p>The situation has taken on heightened urgency in China given Tianjin’s proximity to Beijing. Many commuters travel daily between the two cities, often using high-speed rail, which takes about 30 minutes.</p> <p>In response to the threat of rising infection rates, Tianjin officials have quickly moved to enforce lockdowns in several affected neighborhoods. Widespread testing of the entire city was still underway on Monday. The authorities have also tightened travel restrictions into and out of Tianjin, requiring residents to obtain approval from employers or community officials before leaving. And starting Sunday afternoon, train tickets between Tianjin and Beijing were suspended for purchase.</p> <p>But there were worrying signs that the Omicron variant had already spread beyond Tianjin. The central Chinese city of Anyang, in Henan Province, reported two local Omicron infections on Monday, traced to a student who had traveled from Tianjin on Dec. 28, spurring concerns that the Omicron variant may have already been circulating in Tianjin for nearly two weeks.</p>

	<p>Millions of people in the Chinese cities of Xi'an and Yuzhou, in Henan Province, are also currently being confined to their homes following a recent surge in cases of the Delta variant.</p> <p>The outbreaks have concerned officials in Beijing, who are stepping up measures to ensure that the virus does not penetrate the capital city's already substantial fortifications ahead of the Games. On Monday, the Beijing Center for Disease Control and Prevention called on residents who had traveled to areas with recent flare-ups to report themselves to the authorities. That would include anyone who has been in or passed through Tianjin since Dec. 9.</p> <p>On Monday, Beijing officials also urged residents not to leave during the Lunar New Year holiday, which begins on Jan. 31. For many of the city's millions of migrant workers, it is the third year in a row in which the coronavirus has spoiled the weeklong holiday, which is typically their only chance to return home and see loved ones.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Catch flu and Covid at same time?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/10/world/omicron-covid-testing-vaccines#can-you-get-the-flu-and-covid-at-the-same-time
GIST	<p>Reports about dual infection with the flu virus and the coronavirus have been making sensational headlines recently. But how worried should we be?</p> <p>We spoke to experts to better understand what it could mean to test positive for both infections. Here's what to keep in mind.</p> <p>Will co-infection make me twice as sick?</p> <p>A co-infection doesn't immediately mean that a patient will be doubly sick. A strong immune response may actually help the body fight off pathogens of all types, so one infection could stimulate some additional protection.</p> <p>"An infection to one might help to aid your immune response to another," Dr. Grein said, "because it's activating that same immune response that's going to be effective in fighting both."</p> <p>Still, scientists don't know for sure yet, because so few people have tested positive for both Covid-19 and influenza. But judging from past trends, doctors are not overly worried.</p> <p>Who is most susceptible?</p> <p>Dr. Saad B. Omer, the director of the Yale Institute for Global Health, identified two groups he thought could be most vulnerable to co-infection.</p> <p>First: unvaccinated adults. "Based on previous work on vaccinations, people who refuse one vaccine might refuse others as well," he said. He said he expected there to be a "significant overlap between people who refuse both vaccines."</p> <p>Second: children, especially those under 5, who are too young to get vaccinated against Covid. Kids are also petri dishes, as any parent will tell you, and have lived through fewer cycles of the flu. So even if a child got a flu shot, Dr. Omer said, "their library of protection is narrow" against the many viral flu strains that can emerge each year.</p> <p>How can I prevent co-infection?</p> <p>On this one, the medical advice remains consistent: Get vaccinated for both Covid and flu. And get vaccinated right now.</p> <p>Both kids and adults can get both vaccines at the same time. Children ages 5 years and older are eligible for a Covid vaccine, and children older than 6 months can get vaccinated against the flu.</p>

	In addition, experts agree you should wear masks and maintain social distancing measures when appropriate. Both flu and the coronavirus are airborne viruses, so limiting your exposure cuts down on your chances of getting infected.
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HEADLINE	01/11 Poland reaches 100,000 Covid deaths
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/poland-hits-grim-milestone-100000-deaths-covid-19-82193276
GIST	<p>WARSAW, Poland -- Poland has become the latest European nation to reach the grim milestone of 100,000 deaths related to the coronavirus.</p> <p>Nearly a quarter of those deaths — some 24,000 — occurred in the most recent wave of infection that began in October, a period in which vaccines have been widely available in the European Union nation.</p> <p>Health Minister Adam Niedzielski said early Tuesday that 493 deaths of people with COVID-19 had been registered in the past day, pushing the death toll to over 100,000.</p> <p>The vast majority of the deaths are among people who have not been vaccinated. The vaccination rate in Poland is 55.8%.</p> <p>Poland now joins Italy, the U.K, France and Germany as those European nations that have recorded 100,000 deaths.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Nicaragua Ortega 4th consecutive term
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/us-sanctions-nicaragua-officials-ortega-inaugurated-82182283
GIST	<p>MANAGUA, Nicaragua -- Nicaragua President Daniel Ortega was sworn in for a fourth consecutive term Monday following elections considered rigged and on a day marked by sanctions from the United States and European Union against members of his government.</p> <p>Alongside him was first lady Rosario Murillo, sworn in for her second term as his vice president.</p> <p>“We are going to continue fighting to defend the people so they have health care, education and housing,” the former Sandinista commander said in the capital's Revolution Plaza filled with the waving flags of his party.</p> <p>Ortega, 76, and Murillo, 70, oversaw the jailing of opposition leaders, including seven potential challengers for the presidency, months before the November election. They have remained defiant under foreign pressure.</p> <p>On Monday evening, Ortega called for the lifting of sanctions against Venezuela and Cuba — both of whose leaders attended the event — and said U.S. President “has more than 700 political prisoners” in reference to those jailed in relation to the storming of the U.S. capitol a year ago.</p> <p>Ortega maintains that huge street protests against his government in April 2018 were an attempt to overthrow his government with foreign backing.</p> <p>Earlier Monday, the U.S. Treasury Department slapped sanctions on more Nicaraguan officials.</p> <p>The Treasury Department announced it will freeze the U.S. assets of the defense minister and five other officials in the army, telecom and mining sectors. As with dozens of Nicaraguan officials already under sanctions, U.S. citizens will be prohibited from having dealings with them.</p>

“Since April 2018, the Ortega-Murillo regime has cracked down on political opposition and public demonstrations, leading to more than 300 deaths, 2,000 injuries, and the imprisonment of hundreds of political and civil society actors,” according to a Treasury Department statement. “More than 100,000 Nicaraguans have since fled the country.”

The State Department said Nicaragua “continues to hold 170 political prisoners, with many of those detained suffering from a lack of adequate food and proper medical care.”

The State Department is also imposing visa restrictions on 116 individuals linked to the Ortega regime, “including mayors, prosecutors, university administrators, as well as police, prison, and military officials.”

“Ortega’s corrupt security and judicial system arrested these individuals for practicing independent journalism, working for civil society organizations, seeking to compete in elections, and publicly expressing an opinion contrary to government orthodoxy, among other activities considered normal in a free society,” the State Department wrote.

“President Ortega will inaugurate himself for a new presidential term today, but the pre-determined election he staged on November 7 does not provide him with a new democratic mandate,” according to the statement. “Only free and fair elections can do that.”

Ortega was elected to a fourth consecutive term in Nov. 7 elections that were broadly criticized as a farce after seven likely challengers to Ortega were arrested and jailed in the months prior to the vote. His inauguration ceremony was expected to be held later Monday.

With all government institutions firmly within Ortega’s grasp and the opposition exiled, jailed or in hiding, the 75-year-old leader eroded what hope remained the country could soon return to a democratic path. Instead, he appeared poised to test the international community’s resolve and continue thumbing his nose at their targeted sanctions and statements of disapproval.

The Ortega regime has been hit by rounds of condemnation and sanctions since the vote.

Nicaragua’s government announced in November it will withdraw from the Organization of American States, after the regional body accused Ortega’s government of acts of repression and rigging the election.

The OAS General Assembly voted to condemn the elections, saying they “were not free, fair or transparent, and lack democratic legitimacy.”

Twenty-five countries in the Americas voted in favor of the resolution, while seven — including Mexico — abstained. Only Nicaragua voted against it.

Ortega’s defiant stance has placed Latin American governments in the dilemma of deciding whether to send representatives to the inauguration ceremony.

The Mexican government, for example, flip-flopped repeatedly Sunday and Monday on whether it would send anybody.

On Sunday, Mexico said it would send a mid-level foreign relations official, then said it wouldn’t. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said Monday that he wasn’t sure, then corrected and said he would send the charge d’affaires at the Mexican Embassy in Managua.

The list of those expected to attend included representatives from China, North Korea, Iran, Russia and Syria. Venezuela President Nicolas Maduro and Cuba President Miguel Díaz-Canel also attended.

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SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/chile-starts-fourth-vaccine-dose-coronavirus-cases-rise-82178673
GIST	<p>SANTIAGO, Chile -- Chile is implementing a fourth vaccination dose for some citizens as the number of daily coronavirus infections rises.</p> <p>President Sebastián Piñera was present on Monday when two adults with immunosuppression problems received a fourth vaccination for COVID-19 at a Santiago hospital.</p> <p>Chile is applying a fourth dose early because the current daily infection rate of 4,000 coronavirus cases could rise to 10,000 or more, Piñera said.</p> <p>Vaccination with a fourth dose for the immunosuppressed will end on Feb. 7. Then the program will turn to people over 55 years old who had a third dose at least six months ago.</p> <p>Chile, which has 19 million people, had planned to start with the fourth dose in February. The sharp increase in infections in neighboring Argentina, Bolivia and Peru contributed to its decision to advance the process.</p> <p>Israel approved a fourth vaccine dose for people most vulnerable to COVID-19, an official said on Dec. 30, becoming one of the first countries to do so as it braced for a wave of infections fueled by the omicron variant.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Free rapid tests; not in time omicron peak
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/government-sending-free-rapid-tests-dont-expect-omicrons/story?id=82169711
GIST	<p>The Biden administration's plan to send 500 million at-home tests to Americans for free is an historic undertaking, but one that will take weeks or months to fully execute, recently released contracts and interviews with seven test manufacturers suggest.</p> <p>Contracts for the first two batches of tests were announced on Friday, one for 13.3 million kits from a health technology company and another for an undisclosed amount from a distribution company in Virginia that had extras on hand -- all to be distributed in an effort to reduce the massive testing shortage in the U.S.</p> <p>And while a White House official told ABC News that the rest of the contracts to fulfill the 500-million pledge are expected to be awarded in the next two weeks, the cumbersome process of ramping up test availability indicates that the plan won't deliver a quick fix.</p> <p>Tests won't be available to be ordered through a government website until later this month, the official said, meaning it's unlikely the average American will get free tests delivered in time for the January peak of omicron cases predicted by most models.</p> <p>In the last week alone, the U.S. has reported more than 4.1 million new COVID-19 cases -- the highest number of cases seen over the span of a week on record.</p> <p>And as cases soar, tests have become increasingly vital for basic day-to-day needs, including keeping kids in school and employees in the workforce.</p> <p>ABC News reached out to all 13 testing companies that have an FDA authorization for at-home test kits. In interviews with seven, including five of the largest producers, the testing companies said they were each producing anywhere from a few million to 200 million tests per month.</p> <p>But that total supply is intended for all customers, including pharmacies and grocery stores, not solely for the government.</p>

Dr. Michael Mina, chief science officer for eMed, a health care technology company that proctors at-home rapid tests, said he expects to see around 100 to 200 million tests distributed in the month after the website launches, an estimate he made based on conversations with test manufacturers.

Tests are then expected to ramp up in February after two newly authorized rapid tests hit the market, which could contribute tens of millions of tests to the government's supply. But it will take longer than just a month for testing companies to produce the half a billion tests promised by the government.

For experts focused on the near future, that's a concern.

"We need the testing yesterday, we need those tests available," Dr. Gerald Harmon, president of the American Medical Association, said in an interview with ABC News. "And that's going to be incredibly important for us to overcome the spread and mitigate the spread of this virus."

One of the leading producers, iHealth, plans to distribute 200 million tests this month to buyers like state governments and Amazon, the company's chief operating officer, Jack Feng, told ABC News.

Feng said iHealth could increase its supply to work with the federal government, contributing 50 million in the next three weeks and an additional 150 million tests in February.

But Feng says manufacturing the tests isn't the major issue for iHealth -- it's getting them into the country from China, where they're made.

Abbott, one of the first major testing companies to produce an at-home rapid test, has invested in new plants and automation to further increase its supply, which is one of the biggest sources of U.S. tests, a spokesperson said.

"We're running 24/7 to make 70 million tests per month with plans to surpass that," said John Koval, a spokesperson for Abbott.

The two newest tests on the scene, from Roche and Siemens Healthineers, could give an extra boost if the companies are awarded contracts from the government. Both companies said they will be able to deliver "tens of millions" of tests per month, once they become available.

But for Roche, initial deliveries won't begin arriving until "late January with capacity ramping up to full output throughout February and March," a spokesperson said. Siemens told ABC News they anticipate a first supply of tests will be also available sometime in January.

Quidel, another large manufacturer, said it recently opened a manufacturing facility in California and is shipping "millions of QuickVue tests."

And two smaller companies, Becton Dickinson and Ellume, will contribute 20 million between the two of them.

Taken altogether, the testing companies alone are unlikely to hit 500 million within a month.

Fast action requires manufacturing capabilities that the U.S. wasn't prepared for, in part because of the unpredictability of the virus but also due to the country's vaccine-focused approach over the past year, which drove down demand for tests and left the country with fewer tests when it needed them most.

"It is important for the U.S. to maintain the testing manufacturing capacity and supply during periods of low demand so we can respond to future variants and surges," Koval, with Abbott, said.

"We're on the right path now, but we can't be complacent or think that testing won't play a critical role in our ability to gather safely," he said.

Unlike PCR tests, which are able to detect even small amounts of virus and can stay positive for up to three months after an infection, rapid tests are helpful for a person to know if they are likely to be contagious in that moment.

Increased access to rapid tests means Americans will be able to follow the advice of experts who say you should use rapid tests frequently, ideally a few times a week, to detect when someone becomes contagious to others.

For its part, the White House did not pledge to deliver all 500 million tests in January, but to just begin sending them then. Officials have not provided a concrete timeline on when the full amount of tests will be delivered to Americans.

It's also not clear how many tests would be distributed to each American, though the White House has said people will request them through a website that will launch when enough tests have been acquired.

But the administration remains confident in the plan, maintaining that they are making significant progress and will deliver on the extra 500 million tests without dipping into the supply on pharmacy shelves.

"We expect to have all 500 million [tests] contracted over the next two weeks, and Americans will be able to begin ordering these tests online later this month," a White House official told ABC News.

"We are ensuring that the tests contracted arrive as quickly as they are manufactured by the companies, and then immediately made available to the American people," the official said.

The official said the first tests from the initial contracts awarded will be delivered to the government next week, then be distributed to Americans once the website launches.

"Securing half a billion tests will require agreements with multiple manufacturers and distributors, and the Biden administration continues to be an active partner to help accelerate production and distribution of at-home tests at large, including investing billions and using the Defense Production Act," the official said.

A distribution plan is also in final stages between the White House and the U.S. Post Office, according to a source who was briefed on the plan last week.

In the meantime, Americans can buy tests where they can find them, though supply is spotty in many parts of the country. Beginning next week those tests will be reimbursable through health insurance, the White House said last week.

"Obviously this is an unprecedented action, to have a half a billion tests bought by the U.S. government and distributed for free," White House COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients told reporters on Tuesday. "And we'll continue to do more and more to increase access to testing."

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HEADLINE	01/10 San Francisco high rise sinks, tilts 3in./year
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/san-francisco-luxury-high-rise-tilting-inches-year-82185588
GIST	<p>SAN FRANCISCO -- A 58-story luxury apartment building in San Francisco continues to sink and is tilting about 3 inches (7.5 centimeters) per year, the engineer responsible for fixing the troubled building said.</p> <p>At the current rate without a fix, the Millennium Tower in just a few years could reach a 40-inch (1-meter) tilt, which would be the point at which the elevators and plumbing may no longer operate, said Ron Hamburger, the engineer.</p>

Hamburger told the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in an update hearing last week that the building remains safe and that installing 18 steel piles to bedrock is the best way to stop the tilting and possibly reverse some of it, KNTV-TV reported.

“The building does continue to settle at a rate of about one-half inch per year and to tilt at a rate of about three inches per year,” he told supervisors last week. “It is doing this whether we are conducting work at the site or not.”

Millennium Tower opened to fanfare in 2009 and all 419 apartments quickly sold out. High-profile residents have included former San Francisco 49er Joe Montana, late venture capitalist Tom Perkins and San Francisco Giants outfielder Hunter Pence.

But by 2016, the building had sunk 16 inches (40 centimeters) into the soft soil and landfill of San Francisco’s dense financial district. It was also leaning, creating a 2-inch (5-cm) tilt at the base and a 6-inch (15-cm) lean at the top. Residents sued the developer and designers.

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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	01/10 Feds spending facial recognition expands
SOURCE	https://www.cyberscoop.com/feds-spending-on-facial-recognition-tech-continues-unmitigated-despite-privacy-concerns/
GIST	<p>The FBI on Dec. 30 signed a deal with Clearview AI for an \$18,000 subscription license to the company’s facial recognition technology. While the value of the contract might seem just a drop in the bucket for the agency’s nearly \$10 billion budget, the contract was significant in that it cemented the agency’s relationship with the controversial firm. The FBI previously acknowledged using Clearview AI to the Government Accountability Office but did not specify if it had a contract with the company.</p> <p>The FBI didn’t respond to a request for comment, but it isn’t the only federal law enforcement agency to ramp up its procurement of privately-owned facial recognition technologies in recent months. In September, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement spent almost \$4 million on facial recognition technology from a company called Trust Stamp, as Business Insider first reported. The same month agency purchased a contract with Clearview AI starting at \$500,000 with the potential to go up to \$1.5 million dollars. In total, ICE investment in Clearview AI has more than doubled during the Biden administration, said Jack Poulson, executive director of the nonprofit Tech Inquiry.</p> <p>The contracts demonstrate that despite a growing chorus of concerns from lawmakers, regulators and civil liberties advocates about the dangers of facial recognition technology, federal law enforcement agencies have no interest in rolling back their use of the technologies. Instead, they’re plowing ahead with private partnerships with companies whose databases of photos of private citizens eclipse government databases in scale.</p> <p>In fact, CyberScoop identified more than 20 federal law enforcement contracts with a total overall ceiling of over \$7 million that included facial recognition in the award description or to companies whose primary product is facial recognition technology since June, when a government watchdog released a report warning about the unmitigated technology. Even that number, which was compiled from a database of government contracts created by transparency nonprofit Tech Inquiry and confirmed with federal contracting records, is likely incomplete. Procurement awards often use imprecise descriptions and sometimes the true beneficiary of the award is obscured by subcontractor status.</p> <p>This lack of transparency is especially noteworthy in light of a June report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office that found 13 federal agencies that have law enforcement, including the FBI, did not track which non-federal systems with facial recognition technology their employees used. If agencies</p>

don't know what systems their employees are using, they cannot guarantee the technology has been vetted by the department for accuracy.

That's a big concern when it comes to facial recognition technology. A 2019 study by the federal government found significantly higher false positives when facial recognition technology is deployed on Black and Asian individuals compared to white males. Even with mild improvements in recent years, civil liberties advocates warn it still poses a serious risk of discriminatory policing. The technology also raises serious privacy worries when deployed widely. Clearview AI, which underwent federal testing [for accuracy for the first time in October](#), gained early scrutiny by building its database by [scraping millions of images from social media companies without user knowledge](#).

Facebook, Twitter and YouTube [have all demanded](#) Clearview AI stop the practices.

Clearview AI did not respond to a request for comment.

Lawmakers have also expressed fears over the unregulated use of technology by law enforcement. Democrats last year introduced legislation that [would prohibit federal entities from using biometric technologies](#) absent congressional approval and would block funding to state and local law enforcement unless they enact their own bans. A separate bill introduced by Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., that has gained bipartisan support [would prevent law enforcement from purchasing data commercially](#) that would otherwise require a warrant — including databases like Clearview AI. So far, neither bill has seen a floor vote.

“Clearview AI harvested millions of Americans’ personal photographs without their permission to build a massive facial recognition database,” Wyden told CyberScoop in a statement. “It is deeply disappointing that the government would choose to reward this practice with taxpayer dollars, and use its credit card to end-run Americans’ Fourth Amendment rights.”

Privacy advocates say that while the FBI's recent contract sheds some light on its operations, it shows that transparency isn't slowing down the harmful effects of the technology.

“This is a case where we see that transparency isn't enough because now we see that the FBI has a contract with Clearview but that doesn't make anyone any safer,” said Caitlin Seeley George, campaign director at nonprofit Fight for the Future.

The technology has been deployed against activists, as the June GAO report shows, and increasingly adopted by private companies, [leading to evidence of discriminatory outcomes based on false matches](#).

But privacy advocates see promise in other avenues. More than 27 states and localities have passed [some sort of ban on facial recognition use](#). And both the Federal Trade Commission and White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy have expressed interest in addressing the privacy harms of facial recognition technology. The Federal Trade Commission recently told lawmakers that it was considering options including rulemaking to help regulate potentially discriminatory algorithmic technology, including facial recognition software. Meanwhile, the OSTP [is developing an “A.I. Bill of Rights”](#) and has hosted listening sessions with advocates on the issue.

“I think a couple of years ago these kinds of conversations weren't happening at all so the fact that we're having these conversations is a good sign,” said Seeley George. “And there are some good people in these agencies who care about human rights and want to do the right thing.”

Still, these steps lag behind a number of allied nations that have recently taken swift action to crack down on Clearview AI. Investigations by the Canadian, Australian, and [United Kingdom](#) governments [found that Clearview](#) violated local privacy laws. France's data privacy [regulator last month](#) ordered the company to delete user data collected in violation of the European Union's data privacy laws.

	The Biden administration’s silence on the company, especially in light of its push elsewhere against surveillance technologies including spyware , is “the sign of a government that is not taking privacy issues seriously,” said Poulson.
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HEADLINE	01/10 Abcbot link to cryptojacking campaign
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/abcbot-ddos-botnet-linked-older-cryptojacking-campaign
GIST	<p>The relatively recent Abcbot botnet appears to be operated by the same cybercriminals that launched a Xanthe-based cryptojacking campaign first detailed a couple of years ago, Cado Security says.</p> <p>Xanthe was designed to hijack a computer’s resources to mine for cryptocurrency (it uses XMRig for this), while Abcbot packs distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) capabilities, which shows that the threat actor shifted objectives to activities traditionally associated with botnets.</p> <p>Xanthe searches for and infects exposed Docker API endpoints. Its main module is responsible for propagation and the deployment of additional payloads meant to hide the malware’s processes, to disable security, to remove competitors’ miners, and to mine for cryptocurrency using XMRig.</p> <p>Abcbot was initially observed in July 2021, when it mainly contained scanning capabilities, with the DDoS functionality added in October, through the implementation of the open source ATK rootkit. In December, the rootkit was replaced with the operator’s own implementation of DDoS functionality.</p> <p>After taking a closer look at the botnet’s code and infrastructure, Cado’s security researchers discovered a close connection with Xanthe, and concluded that the same threat actor is responsible for both malware families.</p> <p>Specifically, the researchers noticed that both malware families feature a similar coding style, with “functions being declared at the top of the file and then invoked in some of the later lines,” and that they also share similar naming of functions.</p> <p>Both malware families, Cado says, create on the infected systems four malicious users that have the exact same names, and both search for and remove users likely associated with competing malware (some of the removed users were used by the threat actors in previous campaigns).</p> <p>Furthermore, the researchers identified sections associated with Docker’s API in Abcbot’s code, but they were commented out, which shows that the attackers weren’t looking to target misconfigured instances of Docker in the latest campaign.</p> <p>Both of the analyzed malware samples are shell scripts that can be easily copied, supposedly pointing to code reuse. Nevertheless, the security researchers are confident of the links drawn between Xanthe and Abcbot, and that the same threat actor is behind them both.</p> <p>“If the same threat actor is behind both campaigns, it signals a shift away from the objective of mining cryptocurrency on compromised hosts onto activities more traditionally associated with botnets – such as DDoS attacks. We suspect this won’t be the last malware campaign we analyze from this actor,” Cado Security concludes.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Govt. warns over commercial spyware
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/us-warning-over-commercial-spyware/
GIST	US government security experts have issued new guidance for possible targets of commercial spyware on protecting themselves from unwarranted surveillance.

“Some governments are using commercial surveillance software to target dissidents, journalists & others around the globe who they perceive as critics,” warned the US National Counterintelligence and Security Center (NCSC) in a [Twitter post](#).

“Commercial surveillance tools are also being used in ways that pose a serious counterintelligence and security risk to US personnel and systems.”

The notice explained that the spyware is being deployed to target mobile and other internet-connected devices using Wi-Fi and cellular data connections.

“In some cases, malign actors can infect a targeted device with no action from the device owner. In others, they can use an infected link to gain access to a device,” it said.

Issued jointly by the NCSC and State Department, [the guidance document](#) warned that spyware could monitor phone calls, device locations and virtually any content on a device, including text messages, files, chats, messaging app content, contacts and browsing history.

Among the advice for potential targets was to update software regularly, never click on links in unsolicited messages, encrypt and password-protect devices and regularly restart devices to help remove malware implants.

The note also urged individuals to only use trusted VPNs, disable geolocation features and cover the camera.

The guidance comes just weeks after it was revealed that nine State Department staffers had their iPhones remotely hacked by spyware from controversial surveillance firm NSO Group.

The notorious Pegasus malware was used to snoop on the employees, who were either based in Uganda or working on projects concerning the African country.

The Biden administration is cracking down on the activities of commercial spyware providers.

In November, the Treasury put [NSO Group on its Entity List](#) – an export blocklist that will make it harder for the firm to get hold of American components or work with US partners.

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HEADLINE	01/11 UK: romance scammers stole \$125M 2021
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/romance-scammers-stole-92m-victims/
GIST	<p>UK police have warned that the period between Christmas Day and Valentine’s Day is the most dangerous for users of dating sites as scammers are out in force.</p> <p>Many fraudsters seek to establish contact and build a rapport with their victims during this time, leading to a spike in reports of romance scams and financial loss in the weeks and months after, said Action Fraud.</p> <p>Those losses soared from £8.7m last March to £14.6m in May as a result, according to figures from the National Fraud Intelligence Bureau (NFIB).</p> <p>Total financial losses from romance fraud over the year (November 2020 to October 2021) stood at a staggering £92m. That’s based on 8,863 cases that were reported to the NFIB, up from 6,968 in the 2020 calendar year.</p> <p>However, this is likely to be an under-estimate since many victims feel too ashamed to get the police involved.</p>

A plurality of victims (20%) over the reporting period were aged 50-59, and half were women. Two-fifths (39%) were men, and 11% did not record their gender.

Police are asking relatives of online daters to protect family members from being scammed by flagging the warning signs.

“Typically, romance fraudsters will spend weeks gaining their victims’ trust, feeding them fabricated stories about who they are and their lives – and initially make no suggestion of any desire to ask for any money, so the victim may believe their new love interest is genuine,” explained detective chief superintendent Matt Bradford, from the City of London Police.

“But weeks, or sometimes months later, these criminals will ask for money for a variety of emotive reasons, and as the emotional relationship has already been formed, victims often transfer money without a second thought.”

Typical excuses designed to elicit money include paying for travel to visit the victim, emergency medical expenses, or investment opportunities.

Some scammers might also try to trick their victims into opening bank accounts in their name, making them unwitting money mules.

“It is essential users educate themselves on how to be a smart online dater, and to be aware of the actions fraudsters will use to manipulate them. Daters should check in with trusted family and friends during their online dating journey to share experience, and friends and family can watch for any change in behavior,” argued Hannah Shimko, policy director at the Online Dating Association.

“Other healthy online dating advice includes staying on the dating platform which has processes in place to protect users; getting to know the person, not just the profile; and never disclosing personal information until the dater is ready. Finally, remember to never send money to someone met only online.”

Romance scams were the second highest-grossing cybercrime type [reported to the FBI in 2020](#), accounting for over \$600m in losses.

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HEADLINE	01/11 Corporate cyberattacks spike 50% 2021
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/corporate-cyberattacks-spike-50/
GIST	<p>Global weekly cyber-attacks hit an all-time high in Q4 2021 of 925 attempts per organization, according to new data from Check Point.</p> <p>The security vendor analyzed information collected by hundreds of millions of global sensors from its Threat Prevention products across networks, endpoints and mobiles.</p> <p>It claimed attempted attacks have been continuously increasing since Q2 2020, with 50% more attacks seen per week on corporate networks in 2021 compared to 2020.</p> <p>The education and research sector experienced the highest volume of attacks during 2021, amounting to an average of 1605 per organization every week, a 75% increase on 2020.</p> <p>It was followed by government/military with 1136 attacks, up 47% year-on-year, and communications with 1079, up 51%.</p> <p>Africa experienced the highest volume of weekly attacks in 2021, with an average of 1582 per organization, a 13% increase from 2020. However, European organizations experienced the most significant increase in weekly attacks, up 68% to 670, according to the report.</p>

	<p>Ransomware was particularly prevalent over 2021. Check Point warned last October that attacks had spiked 40% since 2020, with one out of every 61 organizations worldwide impacted each week.</p> <p>Check Point urged firms to segment their networks, patch promptly, educate their employees and layer up advanced security controls like sandboxing and anomaly detection.</p> <p>Hank Schless, senior manager of security solutions at Lookout, argued that the persistent impact of the pandemic might explain some of the 2021 findings.</p> <p>“Attackers almost always go after groups that they perceive to be most vulnerable in order to have the greatest chance of success. The idea of e-learning was in very early stages when the pandemic hit, so for entire school systems, universities, research centers and more to have to flip their continued collaboration and education to fully remote infrastructure overnight was beyond difficult,” he added.</p> <p>“Before, there may have been some basic cloud-based apps or infrastructure in place that enabled teachers and staff to collaborate or for students to turn in work, but the capacity and security was not ready to take on the complexity of remote learning at the drop of a hat.”</p> <p>Jasmine Henry, field security director at JupiterOne, warned that the discovery of more bugs like Log4Shell could make 2022 another record year for attackers.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 FinalSite: no school data stolen in outages
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/finalsite-no-school-data-stolen-in-ransomware-attack-behind-site-outages/
GIST	<p>FinalSite announced today the findings of a six-day investigation into last week's ransomware attack, stating it found no evidence schools' data accessed or stolen by hackers.</p> <p>FinalSite is a software as a service (SaaS) provider that provides website hosting, design, and content management systems to educational institutions, including K-12 school districts and universities.</p> <p>Last Tuesday, FinalSite suffered a ransomware attack that forced them to take down their IT systems, including web servers hosting customers' websites. This led to the shut down of approximately 5,000 school websites, 3,000 of which are for public school districts in the USA.</p> <p>In a media briefing today, FinalSite said they hired privacy attorneys at Mullen Coughlin LLC and cyber forensic investigators at Charles River Associates to investigate the cyberattack.</p> <p>No school data stolen</p> <p>After a six-day investigation, FinalSite states that they have determined what ransomware gang performed the attack and how they gained access to their network but would not be disclosing their names due to ongoing investigations.</p> <p>The report also states that FinalSite is confident that no "client data" was viewed or stolen during the ransomware attack.</p> <p>"After six days of investigation, we know when the threat actor entered, how they entered, and what they looked at. We are confident in saying that no client data has been viewed, compromised or extracted," reads the investigation report from FinalSite.</p> <p>"During the remaining course of the investigation, if we determine otherwise, we'll act swiftly to notify you and take appropriate action."</p> <p>FinalSite explained that customers who use their service do not host sensitive information, such as academic records, social security numbers, payment information, or confidential information.</p>

	<p>Depending on the services used, though, some sites may host demographic data, including names, email addresses, and phone numbers.</p> <p>While threat actors may not have stolen customer data, the hackers likely stole corporate data belonging to FinalSite during the attack.</p> <p>When ransomware gangs conduct attacks on corporate networks, they commonly reside in a network for days, if not weeks, before encrypting devices.</p> <p>During this time, the threat actors steal data from the victim, which is used as leverage when demanding a ransom payment.</p> <p>If data was stolen from FinalSite, the threat actors would likely publish it on a data leak site unless a ransom is paid.</p> <p>So while this is good news for school districts, parents, and students, it remains to be seen if the attack exposed employee data.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 CISA: no significant intrusions Log4j flaw
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/vulnerabilities-threats/no-significant-intrusions-related-to-log4j-flaw-yet-cisa-says
GIST	<p>In the one month since news broke of a critical remote code execution vulnerability in the Log4j logging framework, there have been no major intrusions tied to the flaw in the US, officials from the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) said Monday.</p> <p>However, they warned about the possibility of attackers exploiting the flaw later because of its prevalence — hundreds of millions of devices and components have the vulnerability — and the ease with which it can be exploited.</p> <p>“We do expect Log4j to be used in intrusions well into the future,” said CISA director Jen Easterly in a virtual press conference this morning. “We are concerned that threat actors are going to take advantage of this vulnerability,” especially against critical infrastructure targets.</p> <p>Over the past month, the Apache Foundation has disclosed three separate vulnerabilities in Log4j — a logging tool that is present in almost all Java application environments. Of the three flaws, security experts consider the one that the foundation disclosed first (CVE-2021-44228) to be, by far, the biggest threat.</p> <p>Easterly described the flaw — now referred to as Log4Shell — as the worst she has encountered in her career and one that attackers could exploit simply by sending as little as 12 characters to a vulnerable system. Once exploited the flaw gives attackers a way to gain deep access on compromised systems, she said. So far, some 2,800 products have been identified as vulnerable, she said.</p> <p>Since news of the vulnerability first surfaced, CISA had been working to ensure that federal civilian agencies make patching the Log4Shell flaw a top priority, said Easterly and Eric Goldstein, executive assistant director for cybersecurity at CISA. CISA, along with the NSA, FBI, and others, including technology companies have been working overtime to provide guidance on the vulnerability to both federal agencies and to private organizations.</p> <p>On Dec. 17, the agency added the vulnerability to a catalog of known and actively exploited flaws. CISA gave federal agencies until Dec. 23 to identify the flaw in their Internet-facing assets and either patch it, apply specific mitigations for neutralizing the threat, or remove the vulnerable asset. Agencies had until Dec. 28 to provide CISA with a list of all applications that they identified as being vulnerable, the vendors of those applications, and the actions they had taken to address the issue.</p>

The widespread patching and mitigation efforts within government — and elsewhere — are likely one reason there has not been any major reported incidents of a Log4j-related compromise in the US so far, the two CISA officials said. But it is also likely that attackers have already compromised many systems and are waiting for the right moment to strike, they noted.

Meanwhile, Matt Keller, vice president of federal services at GuidePoint Security, says his organization's interactions with federal agencies show that some of them are [struggling to patch](#) the Log4Shell flaw because they have end-of-life or end-of-support systems in their environments.

"When a system or software is end of life/end of support, typically the company that designed and wrote the software moves the development team on to other projects," Keller says.

As a result, patches may not always be available for bugs that surface in these products, he says. "The system can be patched if a patch is available. Sometimes vendors will release a patch for a critical patch for something like this, but they aren't required to," he says.

Some Agencies Struggling to Pinpoint At-Risk Systems

According to Keller, some agencies are also having trouble finding vulnerable systems and are using command line scripts to try and find them.

"Running a command script on some systems can be singularly focused where you have to touch each system individually and review the findings," Keller notes.

The process is slower than using a vulnerability scanning tool and could result in agencies missing systems that need to be patched or mitigated against the Log4j flaw, he says.

Keller says government agencies are more likely to have issues with end-of-life/end-of-support systems than private companies because of the typically more complicated procurement processes that exist in government. So private organizations are less likely to run into issues with end-of-life systems when patching the Log4Shell flaw, he says.

"Patching an end-of-life product can sometimes be more involved than one would think," says Ray Kelly, fellow at NTT Application Security. "For instance, if the components being patched have a different programming interface, then it could require significant code changes and QA effort for the application [to be] fixed," he says.

The best that organizations can do to protect end-of-life/end-of-support systems is to put layers of network defenses around them, adds John Bambenek, principal threat hunter at Netenrich.

"Place them on highly isolated VLANs with strong access control and strong network anomaly monitoring on those segments," he says. Organizations should also consider simply preventing those machines from having any Internet access at all, he adds.

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HEADLINE	01/10 Extortion DDoS stronger, more common
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/extortion-ddos-attacks-grow-stronger-and-more-common/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>The end of 2021 saw a rise in the number of distributed denial-of-service incidents that came with a ransom demand from the attackers to stop the assault.</p> <p>In the fourth quarter of last year, about a quarter of Cloudflare's customers that were the target of a DDoS attack said that they received a ransom note from the perpetrator.</p>

A large portion of these attacks occurred in December 2021, when almost a third of Cloudflare customers reported receiving a ransom letter.

By comparison with the previous month, the number of reported DDoS ransom attacks was double, Cloudflare says in a [blog post](#) today.

According to the company, 2021 is when most of these attacks happened, with a 29% recorded year-over-year increase and a 175% quarter-over-quarter jump.

Extortion or ransom DDoS (RDDoS) attacks started to [become a new threat](#) in August 2020 and grew bigger and more complex since then.

They started around 200Gbps and then flexed to more than 500Gbps in mid-September. In February 2021, internet security services company Akamai saw its share of a challenge dealing with an 800Gbps RDDoS that targeted a gambling company in Europe.

Last September, a threat actor deployed an [RDDoS against VoIP.ms](#) voice-over-Internet provider, disrupting phone services as the company's DNS servers became unreachable.

Terabit-large attacks

Cloudflare says that application-layer DDoS attacks, HTTP DDoS ones in particular, targeted manufacturing companies and saw a spike of 641% compared to the third quarter of 2021.

Looking at the IP addresses, most of these DDoS incidents originate from China, the U.S., Brazil, and India, deployed by botnets such as Meris, which emerged this year with a [record-breaking assault](#) of 21.8 million requests against Russian internet giant Yandex.

Unlike an application-layer DDoS, which denies users access to a service, a network-layer DDoS attack targets the entire network infrastructure of a company trying to take down routers and servers.

One of the largest DDoS attacks that Cloudflare mitigated lasted for 60 seconds and came from a botnet with 15,000 systems that hurled close to 2Tbps of junk packets at a customer.

While this is not the [largest DDoS attack](#) recorded to date, "terabit-strong attacks are becoming the norm," Cloudflare says. This one was deployed from a network of IoT devices running compromised by a variant of the Mirai botnet.

Cloudflare notes that SYN floods remain a popular attack method. The SNMP protocol has seen a dramatic spike of almost 6,000% from one quarter to another, although UDP-based DDoS attacks were the second most used vector.

"When we look at emerging attack vectors — which helps us understand what new vectors attackers are deploying to launch attacks — we observe a massive spike in SNMP, MSSQL, and generic UDP-based DDoS attacks" - [Cloudflare](#)

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HEADLINE	01/10 Linux version AvosLocker ransomware
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/linux-version-of-avoslocker-ransomware-targets-vmware-esxi-servers/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>AvosLocker is the latest ransomware gang that has added support for encrypting Linux systems to its recent malware variants, specifically targeting VMware ESXi virtual machines.</p> <p>While we couldn't find what targets were attacked using this AvosLocker ransomware Linux variant, BleepingComputer knows of at least one victim that got hit with a \$1 million ransom demand.</p>

Several months ago, the AvosLocker gang was also seen advertising its latest ransomware variants, the Windows Avos2 and AvosLinux, while making a point of warning affiliates not to attack post-soviet/CIS targets.

"Out new variants (avos2 / avoslinux) have the best of both worlds to offer: high performance & high amount of encryption compared to its competitors," the gang [said](#).

Security researcher MalwareHunterTeam told BleepingComputer that AvosLocker began using the Linux encryptor starting in November 2021.

Ransomware's switch to Linux

AvosLocker is a newer gang that first surfaced during the summer of 2021, calling for ransomware affiliates on underground forums to join their newly launched Ransomware-as-a-Service (RaaS) operation. The move to target ESXi virtual machines aligns with their enterprise targets, who have recently migrated to virtual machines for easier device management and more efficient resource usage.

By targeting the VMs, the ransomware operators also take advantage of easier and faster encryption of multiple servers with a single command.

Since October, Hive ransomware [started encrypting Linux and FreeBSD systems](#) using new malware variants, within months after researchers spotted a [REvil ransomware Linux encryptor](#) targeting VMware ESXi VMs.

Emsisoft CTO [Fabian Wosar](#) told BleepingComputer that other ransomware gangs, including Babuk, RansomExx/Defray, Mespinoza, GoGoogle, DarkSide, and Hellokitty, have also created and used their own Linux encryptors.

"The reason why most ransomware groups implemented a Linux-based version of their ransomware is to target ESXi specifically," Wosar explained.

HelloKitty and BlackMatter ransomware Linux variants were also discovered in the wild by security researchers in [July](#) and [August](#), further confirming Wosar's statement. The Snatch and PureLocker ransomware operations have also been observed using Linux encryptors in the past.

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HEADLINE	01/10 Philippines election commission hacked
SOURCE	https://mb.com.ph/2022/01/10/comelec-servers-hacked-downloaded-data-may-include-information-that-could-affect-2022-elections/?web_view=true
GIST	Sensitive voter information may have been compromised after a group of hackers was allegedly able to breach the servers of the Commission on Elections (Comelec), downloading more than 60 gigabytes of data that could possibly affect the May 2022 elections.
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HEADLINE	01/10 Microsoft: macOS 'Powerdir' flaw
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/vulnerabilities-threats/microsoft-macos-powerdir-flaw-could-let-attackers-gain-access-to-user-data?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Microsoft today disclosed a vulnerability in Apple's macOS that could enable an attacker to gain unauthorized access to protected user data through bypassing the Transparency, Consent, and Control (TCC) technology in the operating system.</p> <p>The Microsoft Security Vulnerability Research (MSVR) team reported its discovery to Apple's product security team on July 15, 2021. Apple addressed CVE-2021-30970, dubbed "Powerdir," in a rollout of security updates released on Dec. 13.</p>

TCC is an Apple subsystem introduced in 2012 in macOS Mountain Lion. The technology was designed to help users configure the privacy settings of their device's applications — for example, access to the camera or microphone or their calendar or iCloud account. To secure TCC, Apple created a feature that prevents unauthorized code execution and enforced a policy that limited TCC access only to applications with full disk access.

The vulnerability Microsoft found would allow adversaries to work around this feature and launch an attack on a macOS device.

When an app requests access to protected user data, one of two actions can occur: If the app and request type have a record in the TCC databases, then a flag in the database entry says whether the request should be allowed or denied without user interaction. If they do not have a record, the user is prompted to grant or deny access.

Researchers learned it's possible to programmatically change a target's home directory and plant a fake TCC database, which stores the consent history of app requests, wrote Jonathan Bar Or, with the Microsoft 365 Defender Research Team, in a [blog post](#) on the findings. If exploited on an unpatched system, this flaw could let an attacker potentially conduct an attack based on the victim's protected personal data, he stated.

"For example, the attacker could hijack an app installed on the device—or install their own malicious app—and access the microphone to record private conversations or capture screenshots of sensitive information displayed on the user's screen," he explained.

Other Apple Bugs Cheating TCC

This is the latest in a string of TCC vulnerabilities Apple has patched in recent years. Last year, Apple patched CVE-2021-30713, a flaw that allowed attackers to bypass TCC protections to deliver XCSSET malware. Once on a machine, XCSSET used the bypass to take a screenshot of the user's desktop without needing permissions, [according to Jamf researchers](#) who discovered the bug.

The year prior, other reported vulnerabilities related to TCC bypass included [CVE-2020-9771](#) and [CVE-2020-9934](#). Apple's fix for the latter caught Microsoft's attention, and in the team's analysis they discovered an exploit an attacker could use to change settings on any application. After it disclosed its findings to Apple, a similar bypass [was presented](#) in a Black Hat USA talk. However, Microsoft's exploit continued to work after Apple fixed the similar vulnerability.

Researchers did have to make changes to their proof of concept (PoC) after the October release of macOS Monterey, which made changes in how the *dsimport* tool works and rendered its initial PoC exploit ineffective.

"This shows that even as macOS or other operating systems and applications become more hardened with each release, software vendors like Apple, security researchers, and the larger security community, need to continuously work together to identify and fix vulnerabilities before attackers can take advantage of them," Or wrote.

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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	01/10 Afghan activists claim US betrayal
SOURCE	https://www.newsmax.com/politics/afghanistan-biden-withdrawal-taliban/2022/01/10/id/1051824/
GIST	Iranian journalist Masih Alinejad told "The Story With Martha MacCallum" on Monday that women's rights activists in Afghanistan feel betrayed by President Joe Biden as Taliban insurgents consolidate control over the country after the withdrawal of U.S. troops last year, Fox News reported.

	<p>Alinejad said that she is in contact with women's rights activists in Afghanistan who are dumbfounded by the sudden lack of U.S. support.</p> <p>"I'm in touch with a lot of women in Afghanistan. They're really angry with the American government," Alinejad said.</p> <p>"To be honest, it's very heartbreaking. I call it like this is — a betrayal, [and] not only from the Biden administration," she said. "It is a betrayal for all of those politicians around the world that are witnessing how people are being beheaded in Afghanistan [and] getting shot in Iran," she added.</p> <p>Alinejad said that conditions for Afghans, especially women, continue to deteriorate under the Taliban. The government has banned the observance of religions other than Islam and recently ordered the beheading of all display mannequins, citing them as "idol worship."</p> <p>"We, the people of Afghanistan and Iran, we share the pain. We experienced this," Alinejad told host Martha MacCallum.</p> <p>"In reality in Afghanistan and Iran under Sharia law, if you don't want to be a Muslim anymore if you criticize the prophet if you criticize the Islamic law and for the crime of apostasy and blasphemy, you will be beheaded."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/11 US: \$308M additional Afghan aid
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-coronavirus-pandemic-health-taliban-humanitarian-assistance-94bf09d3abc050292a930ca826e53cc2
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House has announced \$308 million in additional humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan, offering new aid to the country as it edges toward a humanitarian crisis since the Taliban takeover nearly five months ago.</p> <p>White House spokesperson Emily Horne said in a statement Tuesday that the new aid from the U.S. Agency for International Development will flow through independent humanitarian organizations and will be used to provide shelter, health care, winterization assistance, emergency food aid, water, sanitation and hygiene services.</p> <p>The country's long-troubled economy has been in a tailspin since the Taliban takeover. Nearly 80% of Afghanistan's previous government's budget came from the international community. That money, now cut off, financed hospitals, schools, factories and government ministries.</p> <p>Desperation for such basic necessities has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as health care shortages, drought and malnutrition.</p> <p>The USAID called on the Taliban to allow "all aid workers, especially women ... to operate independently and securely" as humanitarian groups look to assist those suffering.</p> <p>"The United States continues to urge the Taliban to allow unhindered humanitarian access, safe conditions for humanitarians, independent provision of assistance to all vulnerable people, and freedom of movement for aid workers of all genders," the agency said in a statement.</p> <p>The new aid brings U.S. humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan to more than \$780 million since the chaotic ending of the 20-year-old war in August. The United Nations says 22% of Afghanistan's 38 million people are living near famine and another 36% are facing acute food insecurity.</p> <p>In addition, the White House pledged that it would send Afghanistan 1 million additional COVID-19 vaccine doses through COVAX, an initiative by the World Health Organization to improve access to vaccines. With</p>

	<p>the new influx of doses, the U.S. will have sent 4.3 million doses to Afghanistan, which has struggled to deal with the unrelenting pandemic.</p> <p>International funding to Afghanistan was suspended and billions of dollars of the country's assets abroad, mostly in the United States, were frozen after the Taliban took control of the country in mid-August.</p> <p>The decision by the U.S. and the international community not to recognize the Taliban government, which governed with a strict interpretation of Islamic law when it was in control from 1996 to 2001, has created a quandary for Western powers about how to provide enough aid without giving the Taliban legitimacy or putting money directly into its hands.</p> <p>The lack of funding has led to increased poverty, and aid groups have warned of a looming humanitarian catastrophe. State employees, from doctors to teachers and administrative civil servants, haven't been paid in months. Banks, meanwhile, have restricted how much money account holders can withdraw.</p> <p>The Taliban have called on the international community to release funds and help stave off a humanitarian disaster.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 ICE removes Uzbek convicted of terrorism
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/customs-immigration/ice-removes-uzbek-man-convicted-of-supporting-foreign-terrorist-group/
GIST	<p>U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) officers removed a citizen and national of Uzbekistan on Friday who was convicted of providing material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization.</p> <p>Jamshid Muhtorov, 45, was removed by ERO's Philadelphia Field Office via a commercial flight without incident. Once in Uzbekistan, ICE officers transferred him to the custody of local authorities.</p> <p>"ICE is committed to removing individuals who threaten our country's national security," said ERO Philadelphia acting Field Office Director Brian McShane. "This case is an example of the work we do to protect the homeland from those who wish to do harm to our country."</p> <p>Muhtorov was found guilty in federal court June 21, 2018, of providing material support to the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), a designated foreign terrorist organization, following an investigation by the FBI.</p> <p>According to the U.S. Department of Justice press release issued at his sentencing Aug. 30, 2018, Muhtorov was first charged by criminal complaint Jan. 19, 2012, and was arrested at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, while attempting to board a flight to Istanbul, Turkey. He was later indicted by a federal grand jury in Denver and convicted by a jury following a 19-day trial. The memorandum and opinion issued by the sentencing judge described how Muhtorov desired to support the IJU, swearing an allegiance to the organization and telling his eight-year-old daughter to "pray for your Daddy to become a martyr...."</p> <p>Muhtorov was arrested by ERO following his release from federal prison June 18, 2021. ERO Philadelphia detained Muhtorov at the Clinton County Correctional Facility in McElhattan, Pennsylvania. On July 12, 2021, an immigration judge in York, Pennsylvania, ordered Muhtorov removed from the United States to Uzbekistan.</p> <p>ICE focuses its civil immigration enforcement priorities on the apprehension and removal of noncitizens who pose a threat to our national security, public safety, and border security.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Story behind Gitmo photo won't go away
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/10/us/politics/quantanamo-photos-prisoners.html

GUANTÁNAMO BAY, Cuba — Four months to the day after the Sept. 11 attacks, a photographer hoisted a camera above shiny new razor wire and took a picture of 20 prisoners on their knees in orange uniforms, manacled, masked and heads bowed.

The image ignited a debate over what the United States was doing at its offshore prison, which continues operating to this day. It also became one of the most enduring, damning photos of U.S. detention policy in the 21st century.

But lost in time and collective memory to many is that the picture was not some leaked image of torture that the public was not meant to see. It was taken by a U.S. Navy photographer, intentionally released by the Defense Department.

“I was doing exactly what I was assigned to do,” said the photographer, Shane T. McCoy. “It was my job to document it. I absolutely had to photograph it. And I had to send it up.”

The date was Jan. 11, 2002. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, local allies had scooped up hundreds of suspected foreign fighters and Qaeda members and delivered them to U.S. forces. The C.I.A. had yet to establish its secret prison network. The detainee abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq was years away.

And an Air Force cargo plane had delivered the first prisoners to the base in southeast Cuba — the “least worst place” for the mission, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said. Mr. McCoy, a petty officer at the time, drew the assignment of photographing opening day at Camp X-Ray for the elite Combat Camera unit.

In time, the United States would [hold about 780 prisoners](#) at the remote outpost. In a matter of months, after the first 300 prisoners were brought there, the Pentagon had put up crude rows of cells welded from shipping containers. Later, the military built air-conditioned prisons, where the [last 39 detainees](#) are held today.

To the chagrin of a succession of military commanders, the image of [those first 20 men](#) on their knees would not go away.

Newspapers and magazines routinely republish it in articles about the prison, the base and the United States’ war on terrorism. Protesters don orange and re-enact it. Islamic State fighters usurped it and put hostages in bright orange clothing, then executed them.

It has become so pervasive, so emblematic of U.S. detention policy that some do not realize that it was taken at Guantánamo Bay, the prison that the George W. Bush administration made its showcase detention operation.

In a [recent episode of “60 Minutes”](#) about a former National Security Agency contractor who leaked a government document, the Guantánamo photo that was released by the U.S. military filled the screen to illustrate the idea that the government has used classification “to conceal wrongdoing — torture in the war on terror for example.”

How you see that photo depends on “your politics, your awareness of Guantánamo and what went on there — on your capacity for empathy, whether or not anybody in your family has ever been in prison,” said [Anne Wilkes Tucker](#), the former curator of photography at Houston’s Museum of Fine Arts.

“That picture will be interpreted and reinterpreted for probably ever,” she said. “It’s so rich, and can solicit 180-degree interpretations. From ‘We got them’ to ‘More than half are probably innocent.’”

Hours before the first 20 men arrived, the Marine responsible for setting up Camp X-Ray, Brig. Gen. Michael Lehnert, described them as “the worst of the worst” of the detainees held in Afghanistan. It would eventually be clear that was not true.

Just two are held today. Of those first 20, eight were released by the time Mr. Bush left office. None were ever charged in the Sept. 11 attacks.

In [Senate testimony last month](#), Mr. Lehnert, who retired as a major general, called the enterprise he had set up misguided, at odds with U.S. values. He urged that it be closed.

Mr. McCoy, 47 and now a photographer for the U.S. Marshals Service, recalled that day as a long one. He had split the duties with another Navy photographer, and with a coin toss ended up documenting the men awaiting registration in a makeshift, open-air holding compound.

He chose about 100 images, wrote captions and sent them to Washington.

At the Pentagon about a week later, news organizations were clamoring for transparency at the nascent detention operation in Cuba. Grainy, night-vision news footage had been broadcast from Afghanistan showing U.S. soldiers leading prisoners in rags, with bags on their head.

“The challenge was that the Geneva Conventions specifically prohibit holding detainees up to public ridicule or humiliation,” Victoria Clarke, Mr. Rumsfeld’s spokeswoman, wrote in her 2006 memoir, [“Lipstick on a Pig.”](#) To “allay some of our critics,” she obtained permission and released [five photos](#).

People in the Pentagon saw a portrayal of safely held, anonymous prisoners that met Geneva Conventions obligations to protect prisoners against “public curiosity.”

Out in the world, the imagery struck some people as cruel. They saw degradation, sensory deprivation and subjugation.

“Did I ever misread what was in those photos,” Ms. Clarke wrote. “Instead of showing the care and concern with which we treated the detainees, the photos served as high-octane fuel for our critics and doubters.”

Some in Europe were particularly offended. The dragnet in Afghanistan and Pakistan had rounded up English-speaking Muslims, some of them from Western Europe, and they were being sent to Guantánamo Bay.

“Shaved and Confused,” said a headline accompanying the photo in Glasgow’s Sunday Herald. “Even Our Enemies Have Human Rights,” declared London’s Sunday Independent. “Guantánamo Scandal,” said the title of a blurb [on the front page of Le Monde](#). The Mirror tabloid questioned the alliance between Prime Minister Tony Blair and Mr. Bush. “What are you doing in our name, Mr. Blair?” said a tabloid cover featuring a first-day photo.

“I think it’s a lack of visual literacy on the part of, in this case, the military,” said [Fred Ritchin](#), a former professor of photography and imaging at New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts and dean emeritus of the International Center of Photography.

“The attempt here, from what I understand, seems to have been to try to show good guys rounding up those who might have been considered the bad guys, while thinking that they were doing it in a humane way,” he said. “Other people don’t see it that way.”

Both Mr. McCoy and Ms. Clarke said the Pentagon failed by not providing fuller explanations of what was happening in the photo.

“It was this tiny little slice of what happened down there, without seeing the whole pie,” Mr. McCoy said, like “taking a few words out of context” and creating an alternative narrative.

The photo showed a moment when the prisoners were cross-legged while on their knees “so they can’t get up quickly and run away,” said Mr. McCoy, who has seen law enforcement officers put prisoners on the ground the same way.

Hats and mittens were to protect against the cold in the cavernous cargo plane that brought them from wintry Afghanistan. Blackout goggles and ear coverings were to prevent the presumed enemy from communicating and perhaps plotting attacks. Turquoise masks were to shield against the possible spread of tuberculosis.

Without adequate explanation, Mr. McCoy said, “you just see the photo that outraged people.”

“I’m always of the opinion that people should be able to see most of what the government is doing,” he said. “The fact that I have a little slice of history, I don’t mind that. I don’t mind that I was the one inside the camp documenting it. If things got changed for the better, then that’s wonderful. I never witnessed any mistreatment.”

Mr. Rumsfeld [tried to fix the damage](#) by saying that the detainees were in transit and not kept that way. “I think that a lot of people saw that and said, ‘My goodness, they’re being forced to kneel,’ which is not true,” he said.

He declared it “probably unfortunate” that the images were released. The Pentagon stopped giving them out. By then, major news agencies had distributed them.

Petty Officer McCoy learned of the reaction to his photos and called his mother. “I told her that I caused an international incident. She said, ‘I’m so proud of you.’ She knew I was just doing my job.”

When Mr. Rumsfeld [came to Guantánamo later](#) that month, the photographer pulled the boss aside and apologized. The defense secretary dismissed the gesture, he said, remarking that the sailor was performing his duties.

Mr. McCoy left the military in 2009 with a 100 percent disability rating. After his assignment at Guantánamo, he went on a series of far-flung assignments, including in Iraq, wearing the heavy body armor of the time and carrying heavy gear. Mr. McCoy has five herniated disks in his back, bad knees, bad ankles and joint pain.

He still hoists a camera and sometimes dons a bulletproof vest in his current job. But the equipment is lighter. On the road, he stays in hotels, not at forward operating bases. His days of hurling himself off a hovering helicopter with packs on his front and back and heaving a 70-pound gear box are over. He drives a car to assignments.

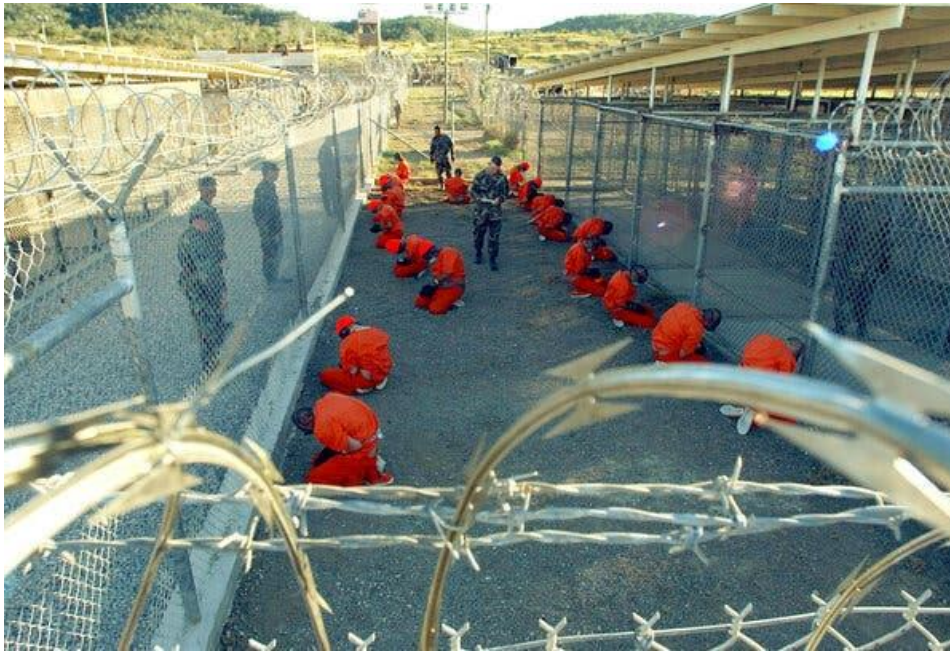
He said he has taken far better photographs, many of them never released.

A favorite from that day showed a female soldier, the kneeling prisoners blurry in the background. Mr. McCoy said, as he perceived it, some of the men in custody “didn’t have a whole lot of respect for women working.”

But none have been reprinted and repurposed like that first-day image of the first prisoners at Guantánamo Bay.

This summer, while on vacation with his wife and daughters, they spotted it in a display in a [defunct penitentiary in Philadelphia](#) that once held Al Capone. “It had my name on it,” Mr. McCoy said. “I’m no longer surprised seeing it anywhere.”

Never did Mr. McCoy imagine that “20 years later I would still see those photos being used.” On that day, in that place, “I was thinking that I had an opportunity, being the only photographer in the camp.” History was happening and he had the exclusive, if only for the archives of the Department of Defense.



An image taken by the military on Jan. 11, 2002, shows the first 20 prisoners at Guantánamo Bay soon after their arrival. Credit...Petty Officer First Class Shane T. McCoy/U.S. Navy

HEADLINE	01/11 UN seeks huge aid increase Afghanistan
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/11/world/asia/afghanistan-United-nations-appeal.html
GIST	<p>GENEVA — The United Nations made what it described Tuesday as its biggest appeal ever for a single country, asking international donors to give more than \$5 billion to Afghanistan to fend off a humanitarian disaster.</p> <p>Five months after the Taliban seized power, a severe drought and the cumulative toll of decades of war have left more than half the country’s population needing humanitarian aid and plunged three-quarters of its 40 million people into acute poverty, the United Nations said.</p> <p>“A full-blown humanitarian catastrophe looms,” Martin Griffiths, the U.N.’s emergency aid coordinator, said in a statement. “My message is urgent: Don’t shut the door on the people of Afghanistan.”</p> <p>Without international aid, a million Afghan children face acute hunger and another eight million people face “a march to starvation, and ultimately even possible famine,” Mr. Griffiths told reporters.</p> <p>The appeal included \$4.4 billion for humanitarian relief within Afghanistan, half of it for food in a country where more than 700,000 people were forced from their homes by fighting last year, adding to the nearly 3 million people already displaced by war.</p> <p>The United Nations sought another \$623 million to cope with around 2.5 million refugees in neighboring countries, mainly Iran and Pakistan.</p> <p>Iran has said that about a half million Afghans had fled there since the Taliban takeover. Filippo Grandi, the head of the U.N. refugee agency, did not confirm that figure, but underscored the danger of further huge flows of refugees if the international community failed to stabilize conditions in Afghanistan.</p> <p>The United Nations raised hundreds of millions of dollars for Afghanistan in September after the Taliban takeover. The new appeal will test donors’ willingness to support a country that has carried out summary executions, severely curtailed the rights of women and suppressed independent media outlets.</p> <p>Mr. Griffiths stressed the aid would support “direct delivery” assistance to humanitarian agencies and pledged that the money would not leak to Taliban-controlled agencies.</p>

	<p>The environment for international aid agencies is more favorable than in 2021, he said. The end of the fighting has improved security on the ground, and a decision by the U.N. Security Council last month to exempt humanitarian aid from financial sanctions facilitated aid deliveries and security on the ground.</p> <p>“The plan can work — the capacity of the agencies to make it happen is there,” Mr. Griffiths said. “The money needed is needed fast.”</p> <p>But humanitarian aid was only “a stopgap measure,” Mr. Griffiths said, adding that far-reaching efforts are needed to revive the banking system, restore businesses and stabilize an economy that has collapsed under international sanctions and the freezing of Afghanistan’s international reserves.</p> <p>Tuesday’s appeal was for three times the amount of assistance the United Nations requested in 2021, Mr. Griffiths noted. But if the international donors do not respond and address Afghanistan’s economic crisis now, he added, the U.N. would be forced to request substantially more aid in a year.</p> <p>“These appeals can provide some kind of hope that that region will no longer have the blight that it’s been suffering for 40 years, 40 years of insecurity,” Mr. Griffiths said. “It’s got to stop.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Gitmo to transfer high-value detainee
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/10/us/politics/guantanamo-transfer-somali-detainee.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — A Somali man who has been held at Guantánamo Bay as a high-value prisoner was approved for transfer with security assurances, according to a document obtained Monday, making him the first detainee who was brought there from a C.I.A. black site to be recommended for release.</p> <p>Guled Hassan Duran, 47, received word of the decision on Monday morning, the eve of the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the detention facility at the U.S. naval base in Cuba. He became the 14th or 15th of the 39 detainees still at Guantánamo with approval for transfer once U.S. diplomats find countries to accept them with security guarantees that satisfy the defense secretary, Lloyd J. Austin III.</p> <p>Mr. Duran was captured in Djibouti in 2004, spent about 900 days in C.I.A. custody and has been held in classified detention facilities at Guantánamo Bay without charge since September 2006. He cannot return to his homeland under a congressional prohibition on the transfer of Guantánamo detainees to Somalia, Libya, Syria and Yemen.</p> <p>John F. Kirby, a Pentagon spokesman, declined to comment on the case or on any approvals that the interagency Periodic Review Board had made but not announced.</p> <p>“The administration remains dedicated to closing the detention facility at Guantánamo Bay,” he said. “Nothing has changed about that.”</p> <p>Mr. Duran is unlikely to go anywhere soon. The Biden administration has transferred only one detainee from the prison, a Moroccan man whose repatriation negotiations were begun during the Obama administration, put on hold during the Trump administration and completed in July. Once a deal is reached for any of the cleared prisoners, the secretary of defense has to sign off on it and Congress has to be provided 30 days’ notice.</p> <p>Mr. Kirby also declined to discuss the case of Moath al-Alwi, a Yemeni man in his mid-40s whose sister posted on Facebook that he had also been notified that he was approved for transfer. “We ask Allah to release them all,” she said.</p> <p>Mr. Alwi has become as one of Guantánamo’s best-recognized prison artists. In 2018, replicas of sailing ships that he fashioned from found objects in the cellblocks were the centerpieces of “Ode to the Sea,” an art show at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. Soon after, the Defense Department declared art created by Guantánamo detainees property of the U.S. government and prohibited prisoners</p>

from giving pieces to their lawyers or anyone else. Prison staff also stopped showcasing his art in news media visits.

His lawyer, Beth D. Jacob, declined to comment.

Mr. Duran's lawyer, [Shayana Kadidal](#) of the Center for Constitutional Rights, said he was informed of the approval after his client was notified of the [board's decision](#) on Monday morning. The document, dated Nov. 10, pledged "vigorous efforts will be undertaken to identify a suitable transfer location" that is "outside the United States, subject to appropriate security and human treatment assurances."

Mr. Duran lived in Sweden as a teenage refugee, has relatives in Canada and has "good options" for possible resettlement countries, Mr. Kadidal said. He described him as "smart and resourceful and has the experience of living in several different countries."

The other high-value detainee who could become the first to go is Majid Khan, a U.S.-educated Pakistani man who pleaded guilty to war crimes charges and was sentenced to 26 years in prison starting in 2012. But last year, Mr. Khan and his lawyers [reached a secret deal](#) with a senior Pentagon official to end his sentence as early as next month and no later than February 2025.

Under that scenario, U.S. diplomats would have to negotiate his resettlement or repatriation as well. Word of the approvals for more transfers came at a time of rising Covid-19 cases at the base, which on Monday forced the Navy hospital there to curtail services.

On Monday, the hospital spokeswoman, Dawn C. Grimes, reported that it had 88 "confirmed, active" cases, and 455 people in quarantine or isolation — including some who had come to the base unvaccinated and required a 14-day quarantine.

Two of the residents who tested positive for the virus were minors.

None have required hospitalization, but all were experiencing symptoms, Ms. Grimes said, including headaches, fever, shortness of breath and cough. "Currently, no cases are categorized as serious," she said.

The base has an 85 percent vaccination rate, and limited testing capabilities for the virus. Ms. Grimes said that the base's tests do not identify variants, but that "through observation and analysis," the staff has concluded that the cases are of the fast-spreading Omicron variant.

The hospital was clearly feeling the pinch of the sudden rise, from 17 cases between Dec. 1 and Jan. 4 to 88 at once on Monday.

The hospital has been offering curbside testing and walk-up laboratory services, and care at its clinic has been limited to urgent and acute cases.

"An increased number of hospital staff are needed to support Covid-19 mitigation efforts," a statement issued by the hospital said. It added that the hospital pharmacy, the only one on base, shifted to drive-up service only, ending at noon.

The Pentagon's Southern Command, which runs the prison, confirmed Monday that it was still staffing the operation of 39 detainees with 1,500 personnel, both soldiers and Defense Department contractors.

It has not disclosed how many of the 900 unvaccinated base residents were at the detention operation, and whether detainees and the mostly National Guard prison guards were in quarantine.

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HEADLINE	01/10 Taliban hold talks w/anti-Taliban group
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/iran-taliban-hold-talks-anti-taliban-afghan-group-82176804

GIST	<p>KABUL, Afghanistan -- Afghanistan's new Taliban rulers held talks over the weekend with senior leaders of an anti-Taliban alliance, the Taliban said Monday. The meeting, held in Tehran, was the first of its kind, underscoring Taliban efforts to bring their former opponents into the fold.</p> <p>During the meeting, the alliance leaders were told they could return to Afghanistan and were promised their safety would be guaranteed, Taliban-appointed foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi said in a short video released Monday.</p> <p>The alliance, known as the National Resistance Front, is led by Ahmed Massoud, the son of the anti-Taliban fighter Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was assassinated in 2001. The group coalesced after the Taliban swept into Kabul in mid-August as the Afghan government fled and Afghan forces offered little or no resistance to the Taliban takeover. Ahmed Massoud was joined by former governor of western Herat province, Ismail Khan.</p> <p>Following the Taliban push into Kabul and capture of the Afghan capital on Aug. 15, in the last weeks of the chaotic U.S. and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, a smattering of anti-Taliban fighters fled north to the Panjshir Valley to set up a base there, vowing to fight the Taliban. Battles raged for several weeks before the Taliban overran the area.</p> <p>Since then, there have been reports of Taliban reprisals against Panjshiris, who dominate the region and are the backbone of the resistance alliance.</p> <p>Sunday's meeting in Tehran is one of the first signs of rapprochement between the Taliban and their opponents. Several prominent leaders of previous U.S.-backed Afghan governments, including former President Hamid Karzai and the ex-head of the National Reconciliation Council, Abdullah Abdullah, remained in Kabul following the Taliban takeover.</p> <p>"They can return to Afghanistan without any worries," Muttaqi said in the video footage distributed to the media. There was no immediate comment from the anti-Taliban alliance.</p> <p>"The Islamic Emirate is trying to ensure that the future of the country is secure for all and that there would be no reason for opposition," said Bilal Karimi, deputy Taliban spokesman.</p>
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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	01/11 Ocean warmth sets record high. Again.
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2022/01/11/ocean-heat-record-warm-climate/
GIST	<p>The warmth of the world's oceans hit a record. Again.</p> <p>A new analysis, published Tuesday in the journal <i>Advances in Atmospheric Sciences</i>, showed that oceans contained the most heat energy in 2021 since measurements began six decades ago — accelerating at a rate only possible because of human-emitted greenhouse gases.</p> <p>Since the late 1980s, Earth's oceans warmed at a rate eight times faster than the preceding decades.</p> <p>"When you have this long-term upward trend, you're getting records broken almost every year and it's this monotonous increase," said John Abraham, a co-author of the study and a professor at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota. "We've built up so much greenhouse gas that the oceans have begun to take in an increasing amount of heat compared to what they previously were."</p> <p>The team analyzed data from a worldwide network of buoys in seven ocean basins. Overall, it found that the upper 2,000 meters of Earth's oceans absorbed more than 227 excess zettajoules of energy compared with the 1981-2010 average. Last year broke the previous record set in 2020 by at least 14 zettajoules.</p>

Additionally, the team found that ocean waters have been steadily warming since 1958, with each decade warmer than the last. Warming significantly increased in the 1980s. Over recent decades, portions of the Atlantic Ocean, Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean have warmed the most.

Through climate model experiments, the researchers showed that the warming pattern since 1979 was mainly attributed to increased anthropogenic greenhouse gas concentrations. The longer-term trends brought on by human activity are also overpowering short-term climate fluctuations, such as [La Niña and El Niño](#), which can have regional effects.

“Ocean stores more than 90% of the Earth’s net heat gain due to greenhouse gases, thus ocean warming is a fundamental indicator of the climate change,” Lijing Cheng, lead author and associate professor at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, wrote in an email. “The record ocean warming in 2021 is strong evidence that global warming continues.”

The 2021 record isn’t surprising, said ocean researcher Linda Rasmussen, who was not involved in the study. Mainly, Rasmussen said, because the major driver of ocean warming has not changed.

“The accelerating increase in anthropogenic greenhouse gases that is warming the atmosphere continues apace,” Rasmussen wrote in an email. “Because the ocean still absorbs the vast majority of the excess heat, it would be surprising if the trend didn’t continue.”

Last year, the record warmth manifested in several extreme weather events. Warmer water provides more energy, or fuel, for tropical storms, increasing the intensity and lifetime. Following a record-breaking 2020 Atlantic hurricane season, 2021 experienced another intense stretch of storms.

Hurricane Ida brought intense flooding and thunderstorms, ranking as the fifth-most expensive hurricane on record, with damage [costing \\$75 billion](#). Hurricane Nicholas and Tropical Storms Elsa and Fred also inflicted billions of dollars’ worth of damage.

The increase in ocean heat also raises air temperatures, allowing more moisture to enter the warmer atmosphere. For every 1.8 degrees of warming, heavy rain events will intensify by about 7 percent. 2021 marked one of the [wettest years](#) on record for the East Coast, thanks to a slew of tropical storms and summer thunderstorms.

The unusual [December tornadoes](#) can also be traced back to the warm waters. In December, record warm temperatures in the Gulf of Mexico created an atmosphere more reminiscent of spring than winter. As such, two tornado outbreaks occurred in the southern and central United States in the same week.

The influx of ocean heat is also affecting the frequency and severity of marine heat waves, or a period of unusually high ocean temperatures, said Rasmussen. For instance, a series of marine heat waves have occurred in the North Pacific — including the infamous “blob” that disrupted the food chains by reducing phytoplankton productivity, starving many animals. The North Pacific hosted another warm “blob” in 2021, a continuation from an anomaly in 2020.

Like hurricanes or droughts, marine heat waves can be difficult to tie to one specific cause. However, Rasmussen said, observations and analysis of more than 100 years of data in Southern California have shown that marine heat waves in the region have become more severe with time.

“The coastal ocean temperatures that have broken records repeatedly in recent years would not have broken records without the underlying warming trend that has been in place for many decades,” wrote Rasmussen, a retired researcher at Scripps Institution of Oceanography. “Marine heat waves are one of the phenomena that are expected to increase as the ocean as a whole warms.”

Outside of extreme weather events, ocean warming is also affecting sea level rise. Last year, seas rose to their [highest levels on record](#). Global sea levels are expected to continue rising at a rapid pace in coming decades.

“Ocean warming is destabilizing Antarctic ice shelves from underneath, which could lead to the collapse of large pieces of the ice sheet such as the Thwaites glacier, threatening massive (meters) of sea level rise,” Michael Mann, a co-author of the study and a climate scientist at Pennsylvania State University, wrote in an email. “This finding really underscores the urgency of acting on climate now.”

Despite the record ocean warmth, scientists with the [Copernicus Climate Change Service](#) of the European Union announced that global surface air temperatures in 2021 were the fifth warmest on record. Surface air temperatures for the past seven years were the hottest on record, with 2020 and 2016 tied for the warmest.

Abraham said air and land temperatures tend to fluctuate much more than the ocean’s. Like air temperatures around your house fluctuating on a day-to-day or weekly basis, air temperatures around the planet experience similar changes. To tease out larger climate trends against natural variability, scientists analyze surface air temperatures on the scale of decades.

Water, however, is much denser than air and holds heat much better than the atmosphere. It takes a much longer time for water to either cool down or heat up. Abraham and his colleagues were able to discern climate trends from natural variability with less than [four years of data](#).

“If you want to know how fast the Earth is warming, you have to measure the oceans,” said Abraham. “Since most of the global warming heat ends up in the oceans, we like to say that ‘global warming is ocean warming.’”

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HEADLINE	01/11 Climate change unbalancing insect world
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/news/2022/jan/11/climate-change-insect-world-global-heating-species
GIST	<p>The climate crisis is set to profoundly alter the world around us. Humans will not be the only species to suffer from the calamity. Huge waves of die-offs will be triggered across the animal kingdom as coral reefs turn ghostly white and tropical rainforests collapse. For a period, some researchers suspected that insects may be less affected, or at least more adaptable, than mammals, birds and other groups of creatures. With their large, elastic populations and their defiance of previous mass extinction events, surely insects will do better than most in the teeth of the climate emergency?</p> <p>Sadly not. At 3.2C of warming, which many scientists still fear the world will get close to by the end of this century (although a flurry of promises at Cop26 have brought the expected temperature increase down to 2.4C), half of all insect species will lose more than half of their current habitable range. This is about double the proportion of vertebrates and higher even than for plants, which lack wings or legs to quickly relocate themselves. This huge contraction in livable space is being heaped on to the existing woes faced by insects from habitat loss and pesticide use. “The insects that are still hanging in there are going to get hit by climate change as well,” says Rachel Warren, a biologist at the University of East Anglia, who in 2018 published research into what combinations of temperature, rainfall and other climatic conditions each species can tolerate.</p> <p>Some insects, such as dragonflies, are nimble enough to cope with the creeping change. Unfortunately, most are not. Butterflies and moths are also often quite mobile, but in different stages of their life cycle they rely on certain terrestrial conditions and particular plant foods, and so many are still vulnerable. Pollinators such as bees and flies can generally move only short distances, exacerbating an emerging food security crisis where farmers will struggle to grow certain foods not just due to a lack of pollination but because, beyond an increase of 3C or so, vast swaths of land simply becomes unsuitable for many crops. The area available to grow abundant coffee and chocolate, for example, is expected to shrivel as tropical regions surge to temperatures unseen in human history.</p>

The climate crisis interlocks with so many other maladies – poverty, racism, social unrest, inequality, the crushing of wildlife – that it can be easy to overlook how it has viciously ensnared insects. The problem also feels more intractable. “Climate change is tricky because it’s hard to combat,” says Matt Forister, a professor of biology at the University of Nevada. “Pesticides are relatively straightforward by comparison but climate change can alter the water table, affect the predators, affect the plants. It’s multifaceted.”

Insects are under fire from the poles to the tropics. The Arctic bumblebee, *Bombus polaris*, is found in the northern extremities of Alaska, Canada, Scandinavia and Russia. It is able to survive near-freezing temperatures due to dense hair that traps heat and its ability to use conical flowers, like the Arctic poppy, to magnify the sun’s rays to warm itself up. Rocketing temperatures in the Arctic, however, mean the bee is likely to become extinct by 2050. Species of alpine butterflies, dependent on just one or two high-altitude plants, are also facing severe declines as their environment transforms around them.

Further south, in the UK, glowworm numbers have collapsed by three-quarters since 2001, research has found, with the climate crisis considered the primary culprit. The larvae of the insects feed on snails that thrive in damp conditions, but a string of hot and dry summers has left the glowworms critically short of prey.

These sort of losses in Europe have challenged previous assumptions that insects in temperate climates would be able to cope with a few degrees of extra heat, unlike the mass of species crowded at the world’s tropics that are already at the upper limits of their temperature tolerance. A team of researchers from Sweden and Spain have pointed out that the vast majority of insects in temperate zones are inactive during cold periods. When just the warmer, active, months of insects’ lives were considered by the scientists, they found that species in temperate areas are also starting to bump into the ceiling of livable temperature. As Frank Johansson, an academic at Sweden’s Uppsala University, glumly puts it: “Insects in temperate zones might be as threatened by climate change as those in the tropics.”

Bumblebees, those large, furry insects permanently sewn into their winter coats, are at the pointy end of this rising heat. A study by the University of Ottawa in 2020 found that bumblebee populations in North America have nearly halved, with those across Europe declining by 17%.

Some scientists have warned that the correlation shown in this research has yet to prove causation, but there is a broad acceptance that changes in temperature and rainfall could overwhelm insects already facing a barrage of threats. In 2019, for example, scientists revealed the happy news that nine new bee species had been discovered in the south Pacific island of Fiji, only to then immediately note that many of them face climate-related extinction due to their warming mountaintop habitats. “In the future, climate change is going to be the nail in the coffin for quite a lot of creatures which are already in much reduced numbers,” says Dave Goulson, a University of Sussex ecologist. “They’ll simply be unable to cope with a 2C rise in temperature and all the extreme weather events that are likely to go with that.”

Even the Amazon rainforest, that humming trove of insect life, is seeing complex relationships torn asunder. The increasing incidence of the El Niño phenomenon, coupled with human interventions such as deforestation, are spurring more intense drought and wildfires. Researchers were shocked to find this changing regime causing a population collapse among the humble dung beetles, which are key distributors of nutrients and seeds and important indicator species of the health of an ecosystem. Counts of beetles before and after an El Niño event in 2016 found that insect numbers had been cut by more than half within the studied forests. The climate crisis is making the Amazon drier, more brittle and more prone to fires, while also stripping away the unheralded dung beetles that help regenerate burned forests. “I thought the beetles would be more resilient to drought than they were,” says Filip França, the Brazilian scientist who led the research. “If climate change continues we’ll not only see less biodiverse forests but also make them less able to recover after further disturbances.”

Insects are so interlaced with the environment that they acutely feel any jolt to the regular rhythms of life. Spring is being pushed earlier and earlier in the year, unsettling the established life cycle of insects.

In the UK, moths and butterflies are emerging from their cocoons up to six days earlier a decade on average, while in parts of the US, springtime conditions that trigger insect activity occur as much as 20 days earlier than they did 70 years ago. Most plant and animal species rely on the buildup of heat in spring to set in motion flowering, breeding and hatching of insect eggs. The reshuffling of the season's start risks throwing delicately poised interactions off-kilter, such as birds setting off on migration early only to find a food source isn't quite ready for them yet.

British scientists who looked at half a century of UK data found that aphids are now emerging a month earlier than they once did, due to rising temperatures, while birds are laying eggs a week earlier. The aphids aren't necessarily growing in number, despite their elongated season, but their earlier appearances means they are targeting plants that are younger and more vulnerable.

"There's good evidence here in the UK that under climate change things are warming up early, so we've got all these bees coming out early but not the flowers, because obviously the day length isn't changing," says Simon Potts, a bee expert at the University of Reading. "We're getting this decoupling between pollinators and the plants and that's starting to mess up all these very delicate, very sophisticated food webs."

For some insects, a warmer Britain is a welcome development. In recent years, insects such as the violet carpenter bee and the camel cricket have crossed the Channel and established themselves, while some native butterflies, such as the marbled white, are hauling themselves out of population declines with a climate-assisted march northward to cooler climes. Flowers such as wild orchids are heading north, too.

These adaptive techniques will mean little when climate breakdown warps the properties of the plants themselves, diminishing them as a food source wherever insects can find them. Scientists have found that CO₂ can reduce the nutritional value of plants, providing insects with a meal of empty calories lacking elements such as zinc and sodium. A study site in the prairies of Kansas found that grasshopper numbers there are dropping by around 2% a year, and researchers felt confident enough to rule out pesticide use or habitat loss as the likely cause. Instead, they concluded that the grasshoppers were suffering starvation via the climate emergency.

Not only is climate breakdown potentially causing insects to be malnourished; it also appears to be altering the scent of plants. Pollinators searching for food will note the colour and number of flowers as well as the plant's scent, with bees able to recall a fragrance and associate it with certain plants and their nectar content. Scientists who measured the fragrance molecules emitted by rosemary in shrubland near Marseille, in France, discovered that a different scent was given off by plants that were stressed, which deterred domesticated bees. As the climate crisis stresses more plants by subjecting them to drought and soaring heat, insects may find them not only a bland meal but also unappealing to even approach.

This alteration in plants may be, for insects at least, the most far-reaching symptom of climate breakdown.

Not all insects are doomed in a warming world, however. As with all realignments, there are winners and losers, and our attention is more easily captured by thoughts of hordes of marauding insects unshackled by global heating than by a handful of scientists fretting about a declining desert moth. In 2020, east Africa suffered its worst plague of locusts in decades. The previous year, the Horn of Africa had been pounded by rainfall, up to 400% above average levels, aiding the reproduction of locusts. Increased heat is also thought to boost locust numbers, with both factors heavily influenced by climate breakdown. Farmers in Kenya watched on helplessly as the sky darkened with locusts that descended to decimate their corn and sorghum. Separate, massive swarms then broke out in western and central India, chewing up land at a rate not seen in a generation.

A hotter world is likely to bring an array of insect pests and pathogens to attack potatoes, soya beans, wheat, and other crops. A group of American researchers calculated that yields of the three most important grain crops – wheat, rice, and corn – lost to insects will increase by as much as 25% per degree Celsius of warming, with countries in temperate areas hit the hardest. Crop pests also tend to

thrive in simplified environments that have been stripped of their predators – another legacy of monocultural farming practices.

In the American suburbs, we will see more emerald ash borers, the brilliantly green beetles native to Asia that were introduced to the US after a few of them clung to some wooden packaging that made its way to Detroit. The rapacious beetles have killed off hundreds of millions of ash trees across North America and are now establishing themselves in eastern Europe. Milder winters mean the pests will be able to spread farther north, causing further devastation.

Even the domestic environment will see a new influx of unwanted insects, with populations of houseflies more than doubling by 2080, according to one estimate, due to changes in temperature, humidity and rainfall. But while houseflies can cause illness through the transfer of waste on to food, at least they aren't major vectors of deadly conditions.

It is worrisome, therefore, that there's an expansion under way of mosquitoes.

Freezing temperatures tend to kill mosquito eggs. This means that a heated-up planet is allowing the insects to conquer new territories, helping trigger outbreaks of dengue in France and Croatia, chikungunya in Italy and malaria in Greece in the past decade. These incursions are likely to be vanguards; the Mediterranean region is already a partly tropical region, and as heat and moisture continue to build, the central swath of Europe and even the southern regions of the UK will be within striking range of a fearsome cadre of newcomers. "If it gets warmer we could get West Nile. Malaria could come back, too," says Simon Leather, a British entomologist. "We could see a real change in terms of human health problems."

Mosquitoes are clearly, by the number of people killed, the most deadly animal on Earth to humans; but in our eagerness to vanquish them, we often deploy weapons with high levels of collateral damage. The chemical compound DDT was developed for widespread anti-mosquito use – before mosquitoes developed resistance and the chemical's pernicious impact on other wildlife led to its ban. A more recent replacement, an organophosphate called naled, is now sprayed on mosquito habitat despite evidence that it is toxic to bees, fish and other creatures. But if our fears of a seething invasion of heat-loving insects were to be embodied by one animal, it would probably be the Asian giant hornet.

You might have heard it referred to as a "murder" hornet. The bulky, thumb-sized hornet has the demeanour of a cartoonish supervillain, with its tiger-striped abdomen, large burnt orange-coloured face, teardrop eyes like a demonic Spider-Man and a pair of vicious mandibles. Despite a flurry of public concern to the contrary, murder hornets do not murder people; they kill honeybees. The hornets loiter outside bee hives and gruesomely decapitate emerging worker bees, dismembering the unfortunate victims and feeding the body parts to their larvae.

This carnage can go on until a hive is completely annihilated, the crime scene marked by thousands of scattered corpses. In some places, bees do fight back. Bees in the hornets' native range have evolved a defensive tactic whereby a mob of bees will hurl themselves at a hornet that enters the hive, covering the invader in a ball-like mass and then vibrating their flight muscles to generate so much heat, up to 47°C, that the hornet is roasted alive. Honeybees in Europe and North America, however, are unused to the hornet and are essentially helpless in face of the slaughter.

As its name suggests, the Asian giant hornet (*Vespa mandarinia*) is native to the forests and mountain foothills of east and south-east Asia. It is commonly mixed up with its cousin, the Asian hornet (*Vespa velutina*), which has found its way to Europe and dismembered so many honeybees in the UK and France that bee-keepers have fretted over the viability of colonies already under stress from varroa mites and pesticides. *Vespa mandarinia*, meanwhile, has launched an assault on the western coast of North America, most likely hitching a ride over on cargo shipping.

Three confirmed specimens were discovered by surprised Canadian authorities on Vancouver Island in August 2019, then another hornet was found further south, close to the US border. By December, the

species was spotted again, this time in the US, about 12 miles further south in the state of Washington. One beekeeper, stung a few times by irate hornets, set the entire colony on fire to destroy it. Another fresh hornet queen, found 15 miles south-west of the next nearest find, suggested either a repeated influx from overseas or a vigorous dispersal by the hornets.

By May 2020, with the hornet appearing to have gained a decent foothold on the west coast, the situation had attracted the attention of the New York Times, which ran a story headlined “‘Murder Hornets’ in the US: The Rush to Stop the Asian Giant Hornet.” Climate change could help turbocharge the pace of the hornet’s advance, similar to the astonishing travels of the Asian hornet in France, where it has moved at nearly 50 miles a year since arriving in the early 00s and is now found in the Alps.

It’s natural to get squeamish over the idea of a squadron of murderous hornets or the idea that those ever-durable cockroaches will march on despite the surging heat. The genuinely scary part of all this, though, is climate breakdown itself, an existential threat we have brought upon ourselves and all other living creatures that we still, despite decades of increasingly frantic warnings, move too sluggishly to avert.

But as we’ve reacted so grudgingly and ponderously to the menace of flooding, storms and droughts that can spark civil unrest and even wars, what hope is there that the plight of insects will spur us on? A more realistic goal is a concerted effort to restore complex, connected insect-friendly habitat and ensure that it remains largely toxin free, in the hope that this will at least parcel out a little time and space from the onslaught of the climate crisis. Although climate breakdown can often feel like a drawn-out, almost imperceptible rearrangement that far-off generations will have to deal with, it is also punctuated with lacerating reminders that it’s already well under way.

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HEADLINE	01/10 NOAA: 20 separate costly weather disasters
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/jan/11/us-hit-by-20-separate-billion-dollar-climate-disasters-in-2021-noaa-report-says
GIST	<p>The US was battered by 20 separate billion-dollar climate and weather disasters in 2021, one of the most catastrophic climate years on record which led to at least 688 deaths, according to the annual report of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).</p> <p>Damage from the year’s 20 most costly disasters, which included thousands of wildfires burning across western states, frigid temperatures and hail storms in Texas, tornadoes in the south-east, and tropical storms saturating the east coast, totaled around \$145bn.</p> <p>This makes 2021 the third costliest extreme weather year on record, with four tropical storms – Elsa, Fred, Ida and Nicholas – accounting for just over half the total price tag.</p> <p>The deadly mega-disasters were scattered throughout 2021 and hit communities from coast to coast, starting with flash floods and bomb cyclones in California and ending with Colorado’s most destructive ever wildfire, which tore through almost 1,100 homes and 6,000 acres (2,400 hectares), causing more than \$10bn of damage.</p> <p>Between 44% and 56% of the country was affected by drought during the course of 2021.</p> <p>Overall, the US saw its fourth-hottest year on record fueled by historic highs in December (beating 2015) that produced spring-like temperatures on parts of the east coast. Ten states – Alabama, Arkansas, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas – also had their warmest December on record.</p> <p>Across the country, people of color and low-income communities are being disproportionately affected by the toll and trauma of extreme weather events, which in many cases are directly attributed to global heating caused by greenhouse gas emissions.</p>

NOAA's [report](#) comes as Joe Biden attempts to resuscitate his Build Back Better bill which includes the country's largest ever climate investment and without which experts say the US has no chance of meeting its pledge to cut [greenhouse gas emissions to at least 50% below 2005 levels by 2030](#). Fossil-fuel friendly senator Joe Manchin's opposition to the \$1.75tn economic recovery and social welfare bill is [holding up its passage through the senate](#).

Failure to take radical action to curtail greenhouse gases will likely take its toll on a growing number of Americans as the costs – human and economic – of extreme weather and climate disasters are already escalating.

“The data highlights a worsening and undeniable trend that underscores the reality of how the climate crisis is already affecting every region of the country,” said Rachel Cleetus, policy director for the Climate and Energy Program at the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS). “We simply cannot adapt to runaway climate change ... Fossil fuel companies and their allies shouldn't be allowed to stand in the way of desperately needed climate action.”

Disaster tracking by NOAA shows that the average number of annual billion-dollar events over the past five years was 17.2 compared with just 5.3 during the 1990s. The staggering costs from the mega-disasters between 2017 and 2021 totaled almost \$750bn.

Climate change has outpaced building regulations which have played a significant role in the rising number and cost of mega-disasters, according to Adam Smith, an applied climatologist at NOAA.

“Much of the growth has taken place in vulnerable areas like coasts, river floodplains and the wild land urban interface. Vulnerability is especially high where building codes are insufficient for reducing damage from extreme events,” Smith said.

While the growing intensity and frequency of weather and climate disasters like extreme rainfall, extreme heat, and drought are directly attributed to global heating, the links to tornadoes are [still not fully understood](#)

Still, 2021 was a very active tornado year with a record-shattering 193 in December – nearly double the previous high of 97 in 2002.

Another historic event was the mid-February freeze in Texas [which left more than 200 dead](#) and thousands without power and running water. Damages are estimated at \$24bn, costing more than double the so-called storm of the century which stretched Canada to Honduras in March 1993.

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HEADLINE	01/10 IRS warns of a messy tax season
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/10/business/income-tax-day-deadline.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — The federal tax filing season will run from Jan. 24 to April 18 this year, the Internal Revenue Service said on Monday, warning in its announcement that staffing shortages and paperwork backlogs could make for a messy and frustrating experience for taxpayers.</p> <p>In a briefing on Monday, Treasury Department officials said that the I.R.S. would struggle to promptly answer telephone calls from taxpayers with questions and that a lower level of service should be expected. They blamed Republican legislators, who have blocked efforts to increase funding at the agency, for the lack of resources.</p> <p>The Biden administration has asked for an additional \$80 billion over a decade for the I.R.S. to bolster its enforcement and its customer service capacity, raising its staff by nearly 87,000 employees and upgrading its technology. That request is part of the administration's Build Back Better Act, which is stalled in Congress. The Treasury Department estimates that enhancing the enforcement powers of the I.R.S. could</p>

yield the federal government \$400 billion in additional tax revenue over a decade by shrinking the so-called tax gap, or tax money that is owed the government but goes uncollected.

Treasury officials noted that in the first half of last year, fewer than 15,000 employees were available to handle more than 240 million calls — one person for every 16,000 calls.

Although the population of the United States has grown by about 60 percent since 1970 and the tax code has become more complex, the size of the work force at the I.R.S. has been flat, the Treasury Department said. The agency has fewer auditors now than it has employed at any time since World War II.

“In many areas, we are unable to deliver the amount of service and enforcement that our taxpayers and tax system deserves and needs,” Charles P. Rettig, the I.R.S. commissioner, said in a statement. “This is frustrating for taxpayers, for I.R.S. employees and for me.”

He added: “Additional resources are essential to helping our employees do more in 2022 — and beyond.”

Republicans seized on the Biden administration’s plans to beef up the I.R.S. last year, issuing dire warnings that the agency would be deployed to spy on Americans and target conservatives. Their attacks succeeded in killing a proposal that would have required banks to submit additional taxpayer data to the I.R.S.

The tax season this year will be more complicated than usual because pandemic-related economic impact payments and child tax credit payments were distributed last year. Taxpayers will be required to report the amount of money that they received.

The I.R.S. is urging taxpayers to file their returns electronically, and said people should generally receive refunds within 21 days of filing.

Usually Tax Day falls on April 15, but it will be delayed for most tax payers to April 18 because of the Emancipation Day holiday in Washington. Filing deadlines for state taxes may differ.

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HEADLINE	01/10 Man receives genetically altered pig heart
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/10/health/heart-transplant-pig-bennett.html
GIST	<p>A 57-year-old man with life-threatening heart disease has received a heart from a genetically modified pig, a groundbreaking procedure that offers hope to hundreds of thousands of patients with failing organs.</p> <p>It is the first successful transplant of a pig’s heart into a human being. The eight-hour operation took place in Baltimore on Friday, and the patient, David Bennett Sr. of Maryland, was doing well on Monday, according to surgeons at the University of Maryland Medical Center.</p> <p>“It creates the pulse, it creates the pressure, it is his heart,” said Dr. Bartley Griffith, the director of the cardiac transplant program at the medical center, who performed the operation.</p> <p>“It’s working and it looks normal. We are thrilled, but we don’t know what tomorrow will bring us. This has never been done before.”</p> <p>Last year, some 41,354 Americans received a transplanted organ, more than half of them receiving kidneys, according to the United Network for Organ Sharing, a nonprofit that coordinates the nation’s organ procurement efforts.</p> <p>But there is an acute shortage of organs, and about a dozen people on the lists die each day. Some 3,817 Americans received human donor hearts last year as replacements, more than ever before, but the potential demand is still higher.</p>

Scientists have worked feverishly to develop pigs whose organs would not be rejected by the human body, research accelerated in the past decade by new gene editing and cloning technologies. The heart transplant comes just months after surgeons in New York successfully attached the kidney of a genetically engineered pig to a brain-dead person.

Researchers hope procedures like this will usher in a new era in medicine in the future when replacement organs are no longer in short supply for the more than half a million Americans who are waiting for kidneys and other organs.

“This is a watershed event,” said Dr. David Klassen, the chief medical officer of the United Network for Organ Sharing and a transplant physician. “Doors are starting to open that will lead, I believe, to major changes in how we treat organ failure.”

But he added that there were many hurdles to overcome before such a procedure could be broadly applied, noting that rejection of organs occurs even when a well-matched human donor kidney is transplanted.

“Events like these can be dramatized in the press, and it’s important to maintain perspective,” Dr. Klassen said. “It takes a long time to mature a therapy like this.”

Mr. Bennett decided to gamble on the experimental treatment because he would have died without a new heart, had exhausted other treatments and was too sick to qualify for a human donor heart, family members and doctors said.

His prognosis is uncertain. Mr. Bennett is still connected to a heart-lung bypass machine, which was keeping him alive before the operation, but that is not unusual for a new heart transplant recipient, experts said.

The new heart is functioning and already doing most of the work, and his doctors said he could be taken off the machine on Tuesday. Mr. Bennett is being closely monitored for signs that his body is rejecting the new organ, but the first 48 hours, which are critical, passed without incident.

He is also being monitored for infections, including porcine retrovirus, a pig virus that may be transmitted to humans, although the risk is considered low.

“It was either die or do this transplant,” Mr. Bennett said before the surgery, according to officials at the University of Maryland Medical Center. “I want to live. I know it’s a shot in the dark, but it’s my last choice.”

Dr. Griffith said he first broached the experimental treatment in mid-December, a “memorable” and “pretty strange” conversation.

“I said, ‘We can’t give you a human heart; you don’t qualify. But maybe we can use one from an animal, a pig,’” Dr. Griffith recalled. “It’s never been done before, but we think we can do it.”

“I wasn’t sure he was understanding me,” Dr. Griffith added. “Then he said, ‘Well, will I oink?’”

Xenotransplantation, the process of grafting or transplanting organs or tissues from animals to humans, has a long history. Efforts to use the blood and skin of animals go back hundreds of years.

In the 1960s, chimpanzee kidneys were transplanted into some human patients, but the longest a recipient lived was nine months. In 1983, a baboon heart was transplanted into an infant known as Baby Fae, but she died 20 days later.

Pigs offer advantages over primates for organ procurements, because they are easier to raise and achieve adult human size in six months. Pig heart valves are routinely transplanted into humans, and some patients

with diabetes have received porcine pancreas cells. Pig skin has also been used as a temporary graft for burn patients.

Two newer technologies — gene editing and cloning — have yielded genetically altered pig organs less likely to be rejected by humans. Pig hearts have been transplanted successfully into baboons by Dr. Muhammad Mohiuddin, a professor of surgery at University of Maryland School of Medicine who established the cardiac xenotransplantation program with Dr. Griffith and is its scientific director. But safety concerns and fear of setting off a dangerous immune response that can be life-threatening precluded their use in humans until recently.

Dr. Jay Fishman, the associate director of the transplantation center at Massachusetts General Hospital, said that using pig organs provides the ability to perform genetic manipulations, the time to carry out better screening for infectious diseases, and the possibility of a new organ at the time that the patient needs it.

“There are challenges for sure, but also opportunities,” he said.

The heart transplanted into Mr. Bennett came from a genetically altered pig provided by Revivicor, a regenerative medicine company based in Blacksburg, Va.

The pig had 10 genetic modifications. Four genes were knocked out, or inactivated, including one that encodes a molecule that causes an aggressive human rejection response.

A growth gene was also inactivated to prevent the pig’s heart from continuing to grow after it was implanted, said Dr. Mohiuddin, who, with Dr. Griffith, did much of the research leading up to the transplant.

In addition, six human genes were inserted into the genome of the donor pig — modifications designed to make the porcine organs more tolerable to the human immune system.

The team used a new experimental drug developed in part by Dr. Mohiuddin and made by Kiniksa Pharmaceuticals to suppress the immune system and prevent rejection. It also used a new machine perfusion device to keep the pig’s heart preserved until surgery.

The Food and Drug Administration worked intensely toward the end of the year, finally giving the transplant surgeons an emergency authorization for the operation on New Year’s Eve.

The surgeons encountered a number of unexpected turns.

“The anatomy was a little squirrely, and we had a few moments of ‘uh-oh’ and had to do some clever plastic surgery to make everything fit,” Dr. Griffith said. As the team removed the clamp restricting blood supply to the organ, “the heart fired right up” and “the animal heart began to squeeze.”

When Mr. Bennett first told his son, David Bennett Jr., about the upcoming transplant, he was flummoxed.

“At first I didn’t believe him,” the younger Mr. Bennett, who lives in Raleigh, N.C., said. “He’d been in the hospital a month or more, and I knew delirium could set in. I thought, no way, shape or form is that happening.”

He said his father had had a pig’s valve inserted about a decade ago, and he thought his father might be confused. But after a while, Mr. Bennett said, “I realized, ‘Man, he is telling the truth and not going crazy. And he could be the first ever.’”

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SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/kent-mayor-city-badly-underestimated-outrage-over-assistant-police-chief-who-embraced-nazi-rank-insignia/
GIST	<p>Kent Mayor Dana Ralph says her administration badly underestimated the public outrage that would spring from the decision not to fire an assistant police chief who posted Nazi insignia on his office door, embraced the rank of an officer in Adolf Hitler's murderous Schutzstaffel, or SS, and joked about the Holocaust.</p> <p>The admission came as Ralph and police Chief Rafael Padilla issued a somber public mea culpa, apology and lengthy video explanation Friday on YouTube as to the reasoning behind the city's decision to discipline Assistant Chief Derek Kammerzell by giving him two weeks off, which he could take as vacation, and ordering him to undergo cultural sensitivity training.</p> <p>Ralph and the chief were forced to revisit that decision — made in July — and called last week for Kammerzell's resignation, in what will likely be a costly violation of the city's contract with the police union by imposing additional discipline in a case that was resolved last summer. That decision followed an international avalanche of contempt and anger focused on the suburban South King County municipality.</p> <p>News of the incident, which occurred in September 2020, broke last week after a citizen's watchdog group, No Secret Police, obtained documents from the investigation through public disclosure.</p> <p>"I am sorry. I have let you down," Ralph said in the 30-minute video. "Our community, our region, is hurting and your trust in us has been damaged and our response in handling the situation has fallen short." Padilla said he was "tremendously sorry and embarrassed. This should not have happened, ever."</p> <p>In an interview Friday afternoon, hours before the video was posted at 9 p.m., Ralph reiterated that the city "took this incident extremely seriously from the start.</p> <p>"But it's a fair statement that we really underestimated the reaction, what would happen," Ralph said.</p> <p>"I have heard from people who were genuinely hurt by this. We listened to them, and responded appropriately," she said.</p> <p>Since the investigation began in September 2020, the city has hired two outside attorneys — one to conduct an investigation and another to advise the mayor and Padilla on matters of discipline within the confines of the Kent Police Officers Association contract and in consideration of the state's binding arbitration requirements for public employees.</p> <p>Ralph said in the video that city officials wanted to fire Kammerzell, but that they risked having him reinstated through arbitration. After a 10-month investigation, city officials concluded that Kammerzell would be given two weeks off without pay, but would be allowed to take paid vacation during that time.</p> <p>"That was what we believed was legally defensible," Ralph said. Citing the attorney hired to advise the city — Mike Bolasina of the Summit Law Group — the mayor said in the Friday interview that anything more significant would mean the city risked having the decision reversed in arbitration, and that Kammerzell would return to work "and he would be untouchable."</p> <p>A telephone call seeking comment from Bolasina was not returned Friday.</p> <p>Kammerzell, a 27-year Kent police veteran, was targeted for investigation after a detective complained that the assistant chief had posted the rank insignia of a Nazi "obergruppenfuhrer" over the name plate on his office door and referred to himself by that rank — one of the highest in the Third Reich, held by officials who oversaw the slave-labor and death camps.</p> <p>The investigation also showed that Kammerzell at one point shaved his facial hair into a Hitler mustache and had been photographed in lederhosen apparently giving a stiff-armed Nazi salute during the city's</p>

2019 Oktoberfest celebration. In the past he had joked that his grandfather died in the Holocaust — by falling drunk out of a Nazi guard tower.

Kammerzell told investigators he didn't understand the significance of the rank, which he adopted after watching the television series "Man in the High Castle," which explores what the U.S. would be like if the Allies had lost World War II. The investigation said Kammerzell's explanation was not credible.

Some statements in the video seem to conflict with information contained in documents obtained by The Seattle Times through public disclosure.

In the video, Padilla says Kammerzell had been "untruthful about knowing that the rank he posted on his door was attributable to a Nazi SS general's rank."

However, Padilla wrote in a formal notice of discipline issued July 14, 2021, that he would not sustain an allegation of "untruthfulness" — which would be justification for termination — stating, "Based on the evidence presented, I do not believe the investigation produced sufficient evidence that you were untruthful in asserting that you were not aware that the insignia you posted on your door was a Nazi insignia."

Last week's revelations of Kammerzell's actions and the city's decision to allow him to remain on the job fed a groundswell of outrage that reached as far as Israel and Germany, where displaying some Nazi symbols can be a crime.

"It became increasingly clear that it wasn't enough," the mayor said in the interview.

After consulting with the chief and others, Ralph said she decided last week to ask for Kammerzell's resignation, which she acknowledged puts the city in a position of attempting to impose new discipline it had already concluded may not be defensible.

The city has reached out to the police union and Kammerzell's attorneys, but no resolution has been reached. "We have just begun negotiations," Ralph said.

Ralph announced that decision at a Jan. 4 City Council meeting, where she acknowledged there will be "costs associated with this." She declined to speculate what those costs would amount to.

The chief said in the video that Kammerzell was placed on administrative leave "when it became apparent ... that we were potentially headed toward termination."

The investigation began in September 2020 and concluded with a report written by outside attorney Krista Slosburg of the Seattle firm Stokes Lawrence on Feb. 3, 2021, in which she concluded the allegations about Kammerzell were likely true.

The city did not place Kammerzell on paid administrative leave until March 8, after the No Secret Police watchdog group alerted members of the City Council and other officials to the findings, according to emails provided to The Seattle Times by the group and documents obtained from the city through a public disclosure request.

Kammerzell remained on paid administrative leave until July 14, when Chief Padilla imposed the two weeks of unpaid leave as discipline, and gave his assistant the option to take paid vacation during that period, according to documents obtained by The Seattle Times through a public disclosure request.

Ralph said Kammerzell remains on leave, but wouldn't say if he was being paid or provide any other specifics.

"But he will not be coming back to work in the city of Kent," the mayor said.

HEADLINE	01/10 Hurricane Ida, Europe floods costly disaster
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/hurricane-ida-europe-floods-made-2021-costly-disasters-82176844
GIST	<p>BERLIN -- Damage wrought by Hurricane Ida in the U.S. state of Louisiana and the flash floods that hit Europe last summer helped make 2021 one of the most expensive years for natural disasters, reinsurance company Munich Re said Monday.</p> <p>The company's annual report put the overall economic losses from natural disasters worldwide last year at \$280 billion, making it the fourth-costliest after 2011, the year a massive earthquake and tsunami struck Japan.</p> <p>Insured losses in 2021 amounted to \$120 billion, the second-highest after 2017, when hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria hit the Americas, according to Munich Re.</p> <p>More than a third of those insured losses last year were caused by Ida (\$36 billion) and the July floods in Europe (\$13 billion).</p> <p>Almost 10,000 died as a result of a natural disaster in 2021, comparable to the death toll in recent years, Munich Re said.</p> <p>The company warned that studies showed a link between global warming and natural disasters.</p> <p>"The images of natural disasters in 2021 are disturbing," said Torsten Jeworrek, a member Munich Re's board of management.</p> <p>"Climate research increasingly confirms that extreme weather has become more likely," he said. "Societies need to urgently adapt to increasing weather risks and make climate protection a priority."</p> <p>Satellite measurements show 2021 was one of the warmest years on record, with the annual average temperature 1.1-1.2 degrees Celsius higher than the pre-industrial period from 1850-1900, the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service said Monday.</p> <p>Europe experienced its warmest summer on record, it said.</p> <p>Scientists say that higher temperatures can cause the air to absorb more moisture, which can then lead to more extreme rainfall such as that seen in western Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands last summer.</p> <p>The resulting floods devastated whole villages and killed more than 220 people in what insurance companies said was the costliest natural disaster Europe has ever seen.</p> <p>"Even though events cannot automatically be attributed to climate change, analysis of the changes over decades provides plausible indications of a connection with the warming of the atmosphere and the oceans," said Ernst Rauch, Munich Re's chief climate scientist, adding that adapting to increasing risks would be "a challenge."</p> <p>The company noted that not all natural disasters are climate-related, citing volcanic eruptions in Indonesia and Spain's Canary Islands, and earthquakes such as the one that hit Japan in February.</p>
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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	01/10 Arrest: Jehovah's Witness halls attacks
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SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/crime/lead-suspect-in-custody-in-string-of-south-sound-jehovahs-witness-hall-arsons/281-fb014bd2-1e9e-48b4-97a4-edf00ee43b7d
GIST	<p>The lead suspect in the investigation into a string of attacks on Jehovah's Witness halls in the South Sound is in custody.</p> <p>The suspect has been charged with unlawful possession of an unregistered firearm. He has not been charged for the arsons.</p> <p>His trial is scheduled for May 23.</p> <p>The investigation into the arsons continues.</p> <p>There were a total of seven reported attacks dating back to March 19, 2018:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • March 19, 2018: Two arson attacks - one at a Tumwater Kingdom Hall and the second at a Kingdom Hall on Cain Road in Olympia. Damage to both was minor, limited to the exterior structures. • May 15, 2018: An unknown suspect or suspects shot and struck a Kingdom Hall in Yelm with about 35 .223 rifle rounds, causing more than \$10,000 in damage to the structure. • July 3, 2018: An arson completely destroyed the Olympia Kingdom Hall on Cain Road. This was the same Kingdom Hall that was damaged in the March 19 attack. • Aug. 8, 2018. A fire was set against the back fence at the rear of the Kingdom Hall in Yelm, but members were able to put the fire out. This fire caused minimal damage to the fence and a back wall of the Kingdom Hall. This was the same location where someone fired rifle rounds at it on May 15. • Dec. 7, 2018: An arson completely destroyed the Lacey Kingdom Hall on 6th Ave SE. • Aug. 13, 2019: A fire was set at the Puyallup Assembly Hall on 62nd Ave E., causing relatively minor damage to an outside wall and overhang. <p>The attacks may have been meant to send a message, the ATF announced in September.</p> <p>In announcing an increased reward leading to the arrest of the person or people responsible, the FBI said it believes suspect(s) "have a grievance related to the Jehovah's Witness community, or about another issue they think is important."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Capitol riot: 4 more plead guilty
SOURCE	https://www.newsmax.com/politics/jan6-capitolriot-indictments-charges/2022/01/10/id/1051830/
GIST	<p>Four more defendants have pleaded guilty to charges on Monday regarding the Jan. 6, 2021, U.S. Capitol riot, according to CNN.</p> <p>Emily Hernandez pleaded guilty to illegally entering the Capitol during the riot after photographic evidence emerged that she was holding a piece of a sign bearing House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's name.</p> <p>Hernandez admitted to taking home the piece in addition to several other items. She returned all the stolen signs to investigators in late January, and she faces a maximum of one year in prison.</p> <p>Paul Colbath also pleaded guilty to entering the building illegally. When inside the building, Colbath assisted another rioter sprayed with a chemical spray. His sentencing is scheduled for April.</p> <p>A couple, Gabriel Burress and Madison Pettit, pleaded guilty after a tip to investigators corroborated surveillance footage on the date. They were both arrested in August.</p> <p>In an ever-growing list, nearly a quarter of the roughly 720 people charged for crimes related to the Capitol riot last year have pleaded guilty to federal charges.</p>

	<p>Additionally, 76 defendants have been sentenced. One of them is Esther Schwemmer, 56, who was sentenced to 24 months probation and 60 hours of community service on Monday.</p> <p>Judge Dabney Friedrich cited how Schwemmer "was part of the large violent crowd," which "led to loss of life."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Charge: robbing 8 banks, 4 businesses
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/seattle-man-charged-with-robbing-8-banks-4-businesses-at-gunpoint/
GIST	<p>A 28-year-old Seattle man has been charged with 12 counts of first-degree robbery, accused of robbing eight banks and four other businesses at gunpoint from early October through mid-December, according to King County prosecutors.</p> <p>Yoonis Idris was arrested by U.S. Marshals at a Motel 6 in SeaTac on Dec. 30 and was booked into the King County Jail, where he remains in custody in lieu of \$500,000 bail, jail and court records show. In addition to being charged with 12 counts of robbery last week, Idris was also charged with first-degree unlawful possession of a firearm after a handgun without a serial number was found during a search of his motel room, charging papers say.</p> <p>He has a prior residential burglary conviction and is not legally allowed to possess firearms, according to prosecutors.</p> <p>Court records do not yet indicate which defense attorney is representing Idris. He is to be arraigned Jan. 19.</p> <p>Idris is accused of robbing eight banks — two in Seattle and one each in White Center, Renton, Des Moines, Federal Way, Bellevue and Shoreline — along with two Burien smoke shops and two gas station convenience stores in Seattle and Burien, according to the charges.</p> <p>The 12 armed robberies were committed between Oct. 8 and Dec. 17 and surveillance photos show that the robber wore many of the same items of clothing in several of them, say the charges. He also wore a mask or balaclava during the robberies, and in some instances, blue surgical gloves.</p> <p>A teller at a Seattle credit union told police he was struck in the back of the head with a gun, and all 12 victims named in charging papers told police they were robbed at gunpoint by a man who threatened to kill them if they didn't comply with his demands for money, with several reporting the robber gave them a countdown.</p> <p>During robberies at Chase bank locations in Seattle on Oct. 8 and in White Center on Oct. 12, the robber left behind notes demanding money and threatening to shoot everyone, according to charging papers, which include photographs of the notes.</p> <p>After a Unibank branch in Federal Way was robbed Oct. 29, the robber returned moments later, fired three shots into the locked door to gain entry, took his demand note and fled, say the charges.</p> <p>On Nov. 15, Seattle police asked for the public's help in identifying what was then believed to be two bank robbers in an item posted on the department's online blotter, which included photos, according to the charges. Soon after, two anonymous tipsters independently contacted police, said the photos were of a single robber and identified the man as Idris, with one of the tipsters also providing Idris' Snapchat handle, the charges say.</p> <p>In a selfie saved on Snapchat, Idris was seen wearing a black Air Jordan jacket worn by the man who committed bank robberies in Seattle on Oct. 26 and Federal Way on Oct. 29; geo location data from the</p>

	app also showed Idris in the area of the Federal Way bank robbery and a Nov. 21 robbery at a Shell gas station on Seattle's East Marginal Way, say the charges.
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HEADLINE	01/10 Haiti PM close links w/murder suspect?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/10/world/americas/haitian-prime-minister-assassination-suspect.html
GIST	<p>PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti — After Haiti's president was assassinated and the country slid into turmoil, Ariel Henry became head of the government, responsible for bringing the killers to justice and helping the country heal.</p> <p>But new evidence suggests that Mr. Henry maintained communications with a prime suspect in the case — and that the two stayed in close contact even after the murder.</p> <p>The assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in July plunged an already troubled nation further into disarray, with many of its public institutions in tatters, a capital under siege by gangs, a collapsing economy and the few elected leaders left in the country sparring for control of the government.</p> <p>Mr. Henry's ascension to prime minister promised to smooth some of the rifts, earning pledges of support from overseas and potentially paving the way toward elections. He pledged to bring the assassins to justice, curb the violence and usher in a period of political unity.</p> <p>But the investigation into the assassination stalled, and concerns about Mr. Henry's commitment to solving the murder emerged soon after. They center on his connection to Joseph Felix Badio, a former justice ministry official wanted by the Haitian authorities on suspicion of organizing the attack that killed Mr. Moïse.</p> <p>Phone records seen by The New York Times, as well as interviews with Haitian officials and a principal suspect in the crime, reveal potentially incriminating details about the two men's relationship. Among them: Mr. Badio spoke to Mr. Henry before the killing and afterward, including in two calls for a total of seven minutes the morning after the assassination.</p> <p>Then, when Mr. Badio was wanted by the police, he visited Mr. Henry, according to two Haitian officials with knowledge of the investigation.</p> <p>Four months after the assassination, the officials said, Mr. Badio went to Mr. Henry's official residence twice — both times at night — and was able to walk in unimpeded by the prime minister's security guards, despite being on the run from the police.</p> <p>It is unclear whether Mr. Henry, who is now the country's prime minister, did anything to help the suspects, most of whom were eventually captured or killed by police. A spokesperson for Mr. Henry said that, despite the phone records, he did not speak to Mr. Badio after the assassination and that he has no relationship with the suspect. Mr. Badio was unreachable for comment.</p> <p>But Haiti's former chief prosecutor, who was removed from his post by Mr. Henry, has called on the prime minister to answer questions in the case. And now, one of the main suspects in the investigation has offered extensive details about what he called the trusting relationship Mr. Badio had with Mr. Henry.</p> <p>In an extensive interview with The New York Times in an empty construction site while he was on the run from the authorities, Rodolphe Jaar, a Haitian businessman and former drug trafficker, admitted helping finance and plan the plot.</p> <p>Shortly before the assassination, Mr. Jaar said, Mr. Badio told him that Mr. Henry would serve as a useful ally after the president was overthrown.</p> <p>"He is my good friend, I have full control of him," Mr. Jaar recounted Mr. Badio telling him when Mr. Henry, a 72-year-old neurosurgeon, was named prime minister.</p>

After the assassination, Mr. Jaar said he and Mr. Badio stayed in contact with one another while dodging the authorities, and that the two even shared a safe house several days after the murder.

In the hours after the killing, when police officers trapped the Colombian mercenaries accused of carrying out the assault, Mr. Jaar said Mr. Badio had sought help from Mr. Henry to escape. According to Mr. Jaar, Mr. Henry responded that “he would make some calls,” though his claims could not be independently verified.

Three Haitian officials involved in the investigation have confirmed that Mr. Henry was in touch with Mr. Badio on multiple occasions. The officials, who were not authorized to discuss the case publicly, argued that Mr. Henry would be a formal suspect in the investigation if he were not leading the government.

Mr. Jaar claimed that he thought the goal of the plot had been to depose, not kill, the president, and that he has been caught in a larger political game that he still does not fully comprehend. He was detained in the Dominican Republic on Friday after six months on the run, according to a senior security official in the country.

According to Mr. Jaar, the plotters intended to swear in a former Supreme Court judge, Windelle Coq-Thélot, as the new president. His account suggests that they expected support from key elements of the Haitian state, including the security forces, in their coup attempt.

But whatever plan there may have been to capture, not kill, the president was scuttled when gunmen burst into his home and assassinated him in his bedroom. How and why the plan switched — from forcing the president to step down to assassinating him — Mr. Jaar contended that he did not know.

Mr. Henry’s phone calls with Mr. Badio were first revealed in September by a top Haitian prosecutor at the time, Bedford Claude, who [called on the prime minister to explain them in court](#).

But Mr. Henry moved swiftly against the officials who tried to investigate his links to Mr. Badio. And the extent of the contacts between the two men — including the assertion by officials that Mr. Badio went to the prime minister’s residence while on the run from the authorities — had not been previously made public.

After Mr. Claude called Mr. Henry for questioning, his supervisor, the minister of justice, Rockfeller Vincent, said he received a call from the prime minister, who asked him to fire the prosecutor. Mr. Vincent said he refused. Days after, Mr. Henry fired them both.

“I believe he provides one of the key elements in the assassination,” said Mr. Claude, referring to Mr. Henry.

Mr. Henry’s spokesman said the officials were fired for violating the law in order to advance their political agendas, including breaking a ban on summoning senior officials to court.

In an interview a month after the murder, Mr. Henry said [his main goal was to hold new elections and then step down](#). He has not set the date for the vote.

Mr. Jaar also implicated another senior member of Mr. Henry’s government: the police chief, Frantz Elbé. During a meeting to discuss the plot, Mr. Jaar said, Mr. Badio called Mr. Elbé, a senior police adviser at the time, and asked him to help procure weapons for the coup. Mr. Elbé told Mr. Badio that he did not have the guns, but also did not try to stop the coup from happening, Mr. Jaar recounted, without providing independent evidence.

Mr. Henry promoted Mr. Elbé in October to lead the Haitian National Police. Mr. Elbé did not respond to requests for comment.

Mr. Jaar, a Haitian-born descendant of Palestinian immigrants, spent three years in a United States prison for trafficking cocaine. On his return to Haiti in the mid-2010s, he said he quit the drug business and built a chain of poultry shops in the capital, Port-au-Prince.

He claimed he was recruited into the plot in late May by Mr. Badio through a mutual friend. Mr. Jaar said he joined out of disgust with the president's growing authoritarianism, and out of hope that he'd get preferential business treatment from the new government.

Mr. Jaar said he did not know whose orders Mr. Badio was following, or who the ultimate mastermind was.

He said he agreed to join the conspiracy because he was told by Mr. Badio and other plotters that it had the full support of the United States, which, according to them, was getting nervous about the president's supposed links to terrorists and drug traffickers.

"If the U.S. government was involved, then it was safe," said Mr. Jaar, outlining his thinking at the time.

No evidence has emerged that any of the named suspects had any active connection to the American government, or that the United States was involved in or aware of the plot.

There are, however, at least six American citizens and residents who are accused by the Haitian police of participating in the plot. A former Colombian commando accused of taking part in the assault, Mario Palacios, [was charged in Florida on Jan. 4 with conspiring to kill Mr. Moïse.](#)

Mr. Jaar said that he contributed about \$130,000 to the plan, helped find the guns and provided the house from which 21 retired Colombian commandos set out for the presidential residence shortly after midnight.

Haitian security officials said the assault on the presidential residence was intended to be carried out by criminal group called Phantom 509, which is made up of former and current police officers and has strong political links.

Mr. Jaar said he and Mr. Badio had met with a man claiming to be a Phantom 509 leader to discuss the plot, but that the gang pulled out about a week before the murder, for reasons he said he did not know. Mr. Jaar said that was when former Colombian soldiers, who were supposedly brought in to provide security for the president's successor, were told that their mission had changed — to storming the presidential residence.

Mr. Jaar claimed that he did not know how the plan to arrest Mr. Moïse turned deadly, with the president shot 12 times in his bedroom.

But minutes after the murder, Mr. Jaar said he received a phone call from Germán Rivera, the leader of the Colombian mercenaries.

"The rat is down," Mr. Jaar said Mr. Rivera told him, using a derogatory code name the plotters used for Haiti's leader. "The president is dead."

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HEADLINE	01/10 Vandals deface famed white cliffs of Sicily
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/10/world/europe/white-cliffs-sicily-vandalism.html
GIST	<p>ROME — Saturday was a bad news, good news sort of day for Sabrina Lattuca, the mayor of Realmonte, a small town on the western coast of Sicily.</p> <p>She awoke that morning to find that vandals had thrown iron oxide powder across the white cliffs known as the Scala dei Turchi, or Staircase of the Turks, staining Realmonte's principal tourist draw with bloody red blotches.</p>

But by nightfall, much of the damage had been undone thanks to the efforts of a crew of cultural heritage experts, municipal workers and local citizens who spent the day scrubbing the site with the aid of mops, brooms and water pumps.

“They are an example of the best of Sicily,” Ms. Lattuca said of the people who helped with the cleanup. In 24 hours, she added, “this teamwork was able to restore beauty and splendor to the Scala dei Turchi.”

Molded by waves and wind over millennia into a grandiose natural staircase, legend has it that it was the favorite landing spot of pirates and invaders from faraway lands, like the Turks, hence its name.

Long a seaside draw for Sicilians, the marlstone cliffs achieved a wider fame thanks to a series of crime novels featuring Inspector [Salvo Montalbano](#) by the late Italian writer Andrea Camilleri, who [lauded the](#) site’s “astonishing beauty.” The works were later turned into a popular TV series.

And they also achieved cinematic renown in Giuseppe Tornatore’s “Malena” and other films.

Investigators in Agrigento, the area’s largest city, about 10 miles to the east of the Scala dei Turchi, are now scouring videos taken from surveillance cameras on the roads leading to the site on the night between Friday and Saturday, when the vandalism took place.

Major Marco La Rovere, the commander of the military police branch of Agrigento, which is investigating the case, said his officers and local prosecutors had “an idea” of who might have vandalized the site, which had been defaced by graffiti in the past. Now, they were searching for evidence to back up their hunch, he said, declining to give details. “It’s an open investigation,” he said.

Ms. Lattuca had no doubts that the vandalism “was the work of a madman.”

“There is no other explanation for such an absurd act,” she said.

Michele Benfari, Agrigento’s top cultural heritage official, instead said the “gaping wound” left by the oxide powder might have been a statement left by a “disillusioned artist” grappling with the tragedy of the pandemic.

He cited one artist who made headlines when he [threw red dye](#) in Rome’s Trevi fountain in 2007 and dumped [thousands of colorful balls](#) on the Spanish Steps a year later.

“That could be one interpretation,” he said. Acts of vandalism had been rare in his area of Sicily, he said.

Fortunately, Mr. Benfari noted, the iron oxide powder used by the vandals is relatively harmless if it isn’t mixed with other chemicals. Special vacuum cleaners were used to remove the powder and the remaining traces were scrubbed clean using a simple soap on some patches.

“We were lucky,” he said.

The Scala dei Turchi is currently closed to the public on safety grounds, as well as over concerns that the site was being damaged by mass tourism. It is also the subject of litigation to determine ownership of parts of the site between the region, the local government and a private individual.

Before the pandemic, the site drew an estimated one million visitors a year, said Giuseppe Taibi, the local representatives for the Fondo Ambiente Italiano, an organization often referred to as the National Trust of Italy, which in past years successfully lobbied to [demolish](#) two illegal structures that had been built there.

It was a major victory in an area of Sicily infamous for its dismal track record in [illegal construction projects](#). In 2016, the Fondo Ambiente Italiano inaugurated a [lookout deck](#) overlooking the cliffs on the former site of one of the demolished buildings.

	<p>“That sent a strong signal,” said Mr. Taibi. “It’s also a way to admire the site without destroying it,” by allowing too many visitors, he said.</p> <p>The Fondo has also promoted the Scala dei Turchi on its list of places to safeguard in Italy. “It is de facto a patrimony of humanity that must be protected,” Mr. Taibi.</p> <p>Locals clearly agreed.</p> <p>“As soon as we heard that Scala dei Turchi had been defaced, we rolled up our sleeves and got to work,” said Claudio Lombardo, who heads the local branch of the environmental association Mareamico, which monitors and conserves coastal areas.</p> <p>“As it is so snow-white, so pure,” the Scala dei Turchi “is the emblem of a clean and honest Sicily, and it must be preserved and protected,” said Ms. Lattuca, the mayor.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Europol to delete data not linked to crime
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/europol-ordered-delete-data-linked-crime-82182452
GIST	<p>BRUSSELS -- The European Union crime agency has been ordered by the 27-nation bloc’s data protection watchdog to erase information related to individuals with no proven link to crime.</p> <p>The European Data Protection Supervisor said Monday that Europol was notified of the order on Jan. 3 following an inquiry that started in 2019.</p> <p>As part of the investigation, the EDPS said it reprimanded Europol two years ago “for the continued storage of large volumes” of such data, “which poses a risk to individuals’ fundamental rights.”</p> <p>It said Europol has since introduced some measures but has not complied with requests to set an appropriate data retention period.</p> <p>“This means that Europol was keeping this data for longer than necessary,” the EDPS said.</p> <p>The watchdog said it imposed a six-month period for the assessment of new datasets and determine whether information can be kept. It gave the crime agency a 12-month delay to comply with the decision for data it received before Jan. 4.</p> <p>“A 6-month period for pre-analysis and filtering of large datasets should enable Europol to meet the operational demands of EU Member States relying on Europol for technical and analytical support, while minimizing the risks to individuals’ rights and freedoms,” said Wojciech Wiewiórowski, the EDPS supervisor.</p> <p>The EDPS did not reveal how big the data stored by Europol is. According to The Guardian newspaper, which said it had access to internal documents, its equates to the equivalent of “a fifth of the entire contents of the U.S. Library of Congress.”</p> <p>Europol did not immediately respond to the announcement.</p>
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